



## **A socio-cultural approach to higher education students' experiences with academic literacies**

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# A socio-cultural approach to higher education students' experiences with academic literacies

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
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## **A socio-cultural approach to higher education students' experiences with academic literacies**

### **Abstract:**

The focus of this thesis is an exploration of students' engagement with academic literacies. The study is based on interview data, visual material and objects brought to these interviews by five students on an Education Studies undergraduate degree course. Drawing from the theoretical frame of New Literacy Studies, academic literacies are broadly defined as socially situated literacy practices. The focus is on how and where 'academic literacies' happen and how these literacies interact with personal histories and students' broader socio-cultural experience. Three themes: journeying, identity and emotional concerns, have been identified. The themes highlight the complex, nuanced and socially-embedded nature of the participants' academic lives. In particular, Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes is drawn on to illuminate the patterning of experiences in time and space. The findings provide insights into students' broader literacy practices moving beyond the current focus on academic writing within the academic literacies field.

## 1. Introduction and rationale

*So it's a study of students' academic literacies, but I'm really interpreting that in a broad way, so that's why I'm asking you about you and your family and your life because things don't just happen in a tiny little box, do they, and it's about the context. Like you're saying you live with five other people and that's an important context, isn't it, in your academic literacies. So I'm really interested in that broader context, your personal histories and your broader experiences and how all of those impact on what you do, how you do it, all those kind of things.*

### 1.1 Introduction

This is how I described my approach in a first meeting with one of the five students I interviewed during the course of this study. It underlines my concern for the broader context of academic literacies and students' everyday lives. The study explores this relationship between everyday life and academic literacy practices. I am interested in what the participants take from their lives into their academic literacy practices and what feeds back from these practices into their lives.

The reason I became interested in this kind of contextually focused study of literacy practices is because of my background as a primary teacher and English specialist. Over time, I became interested in studies of children's socially situated literacy practices and how these practices contrasted with their work in school. When I moved into teaching in higher education I was aware that there were similar and possibly even more strongly marked distinctions between students' literacies in academic and other contexts.

I considered that a study of this nature would add to my own professional understanding as well as that of my colleagues. As tutors we tend to view students as separated from their broader lives. In contrast, the studies that focused on children's experiences with literacy practices in broad contexts have enriched teachers' understandings and enabled them to review their definitions of literacy within a wider framework. I believed that a study in higher education could similarly provide greater understanding of academic literacy practices.



This kind of in-depth knowledge of where practices were situated, how they took place and who with, would add to a nuanced view of academic literacy that moved beyond the very specific focus on written assignments.

I found the field of academic literacies a very interesting one but was aware that often the focus was firmly placed on academic writing and not a wider definition of literacy practices. Furthermore, studies have not generally focused on broader lives with perhaps the exception of Barton et al's (2007) study *Literacy, Lives and Learning* and a small scale study in *Worlds of Literacy* (Benson et al 1994) discussed in more detail in chapter 2. My own study centres on undergraduate students and the broader context of their literacy lives. Although a very small scale study involving five students on one particular programme, I believe it does provide some of the rich and nuanced understandings I aimed to gain through this research.

## 1.2 Focus of the study

The aims and objectives of this study were to:

- describe and analyse students' narratives about academic literacies;
- explore student perspectives of academic literacies;
- consider the socio-cultural context in which students' academic literacies take place and the interrelationship between literacy practice and everyday life.

The research questions included the following:

- How do undergraduate Education Studies students make sense of academic literacies?
- How do undergraduate Education Studies students integrate academic literacies into their own lives (their personal and academic lives)?

The study focused on five participants in their second year of studying for a degree in Education Studies at a university in the north of England. The emphasis was on description and analysis of the students' narratives and a focus on the participants' own words. The term narrative was used to emphasise opportunities for prolonged expression rather than a precise reference to narrative-style research. The study aimed to explore what was relevant to participants and to avoid imposing researcher views. It was designed to draw attention to the broader socio-cultural context of students' academic literacy lives within the theoretical framework of New Literacy Studies

(NLS) (see chapter 3). The NLS draws on socio-cultural theories which emphasise the links between individual practices and broader cultural contexts.

The overall focus of the research questions is on the lived context of academic literacies in the participants' everyday life. Indeed the questions and research aims focus on gaining awareness of participants' own insights highlighting specific instances and practices in order to build holistic understandings.

### **1.3 Organisation of the thesis**

This thesis starts with an introduction followed by the literature review (chapter 2). Chapter 3 focuses on theoretical perspectives. The literature review concentrates on the field of academic literacies whereas the theory chapter provides an opportunity to discuss the underpinning nature of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). The NLS provides the overall theoretical frame in which the study takes place. In particular, the themes of space and time are significant. Next is the methodology chapter (4) which highlights the approaches to research. The research design chapter (5) provides more specific detail about methods used. This chapter includes a significant section on the approach to analysis. Chapter 6 introduces the data. Discussion on the findings follows in chapter 7. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with appendices and references added at the end. Summaries are provided for each chapter apart from the concluding chapter in which the whole thesis is summarised.

### **1.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the background to this study: why the study was of professional interest; what the main focus was and how the document has been organised. This leads into Chapter 2, a literature review, which examines the field of academic literacies.

## **2. Literature review: academic literacies**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter traces the development of the academic literacies field and considers the particular context in which this interest developed. Because the term academic literacies has broadly been interpreted as meaning academic *writing* this provides a focus for the initial discussion. I examine how the broad context of changes in higher education policy since the 1990s has influenced approaches to the teaching of writing. Firstly, I provide an overview of these policy changes and their broader effect on students' lives and learning. In particular, I examine how study support approaches developed and consider some of the surrounding tensions and limitations. In addition, I make some comparisons with a different tradition in North American universities. Following on from this, I consider how research studies on higher education and learning from a phenomenographic tradition influenced what is known as an academic literacies approach. In the final section, I summarise key studies in the academic literacies field and consider how my own study with its focus on broader literacy practices rather than academic writing is situated within this tradition.

### **2.2 A new context for higher education in the UK**

Ivanič and Lea (2006) described the fundamental changes to higher education policy in the UK that took place in the 1990s. In particular, stricter accountability measures and economic concerns created an increasing emphasis on what has been called the 'marketisation' of higher education (see Mann 2008). A significant change that arose from this new emphasis on markets was that of widening participation. Indeed, during this period, there was an unparalleled rise in numbers of students many of whom were the first generation to study at higher education level. Access increased for groups not traditionally participating in university study including students with English as an additional language, mature students, international students and those from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In its turn, the higher numbers of students, an emphasis on vocational study and decreases in funding led to larger classes, fewer resources and a shift away from the individual discipline-based tuition that had

been part of the traditional pattern of study at university. New universities that had previously been polytechnics or colleges provided a wider choice of multi-disciplinary, vocational and joint-honours courses. As a result of these changes, tutors could no longer make the same assumptions about disciplinary knowledge as had previously been the case (Ivanič and Lea 2006). The new interdisciplinary and modularised modes of study required students to negotiate different kinds of knowledge and the different written genres associated with these.

A further significant aspect arising from the notion of market is the idea that students are *customers*. In turn this has led to the emphasis on 'student satisfaction' as a measure of the quality of provision through such metrics as the National Student Survey (NSS) (2013). Despite some doubts as to how reliable or meaningful this survey actually is (see Cheng and Marsh 2010) there has been an increasing focus on its importance and the NSS has been used to compare the performance of universities. Indeed, over time there has been growing emphasis on seeking students' views and responding in ways related to how businesses operate. Customer satisfaction, customer relationship management and responsiveness to customer concerns all have become part of the language of higher education. Indeed, these concepts raise further issues relevant to this study. Positioning students as customers is likely to change the responsibility of the provider. Customers may be encouraged to access 'products' one of which is customer support in the form of study support for academic literacies. The next sections explore this idea in further detail.

In summary, the changes to higher education in the 1990s during which marketisation came to the fore, include an emphasis on widening participation with new kinds of courses and new kinds of students and the notion that we need to attend to what is termed 'student satisfaction' (Kane et al 2008).

### **2.3 Transition to university: the wider context and the need for support**

In this changing landscape, research has highlighted the significance not only of students' intellectual development but also of their emotional reaction to the transition to university. For example, Mann (2001; 2005) focused on the emotional struggle experienced by students as part of university life. She

argued that more superficial approaches to learning noted by researchers such as Gibbs (1995) and Marton et al (1997) are in fact examples or causes of alienation. She encapsulated this by describing students as 'crossing the borders of a new country' (Mann 2001:11) to a place where they have little or no understanding of the customs, language and structures. Barnett (2007) similarly described higher education as a world of uncertainty and cites students who are overwhelmed and in a state of panic. He described the emotional dimensions of transition which destabilises and challenges students' sense of self. In addition, Gourlay (2009) referred to findings which suggest that transition into university involves instability, struggle and challenge to students' sense of identity.

The notion of the constitution of new identities is a significant one and is linked to concerns around academic writing. Indeed writing, language and identity have been considered to be intrinsically linked (Ivanić 1998 and Lillis 2001) and these issues are discussed later in this chapter. Yet Mann (2008) argued that we now have a significantly different context where non traditional students express their dissatisfaction including the emotional struggles described above. She argued that a focus on student satisfaction ratings has meant that universities are responding more specifically to student support needs, in particular, the need for academic writing support. However, tensions remain in how support for writing is conceptualised with disagreements about whether broader academic support, acculturation into the academic community or more specific teaching of writing needs to be offered.

## **2.4 Academic writing and study support**

According to Ivanić and Lea (2006), in their summary of the challenges of teaching writing in UK higher education, the roots of today's study support can be found in language provision in post compulsory education. Access courses in the 1980s, for example, focused on preparation for university study.

Universities themselves then started to provide programmes focused on academic study often using the term 'study support' or 'study skills'. Mann (2008) defined 'study skills' as practices such as reading, note taking and essay writing required by universities. This provision of support, however, tended to be less substantial than that offered in North American universities. In the US

there has been a long tradition of first year writing courses dating from the 1970s leading to a significant body of research on the topic (Wingate 2012). A much cited example of this research comes from Bazerman (2000), based in the US, who has focused, over many years, on socially based theories of genre in higher education writing pedagogy. North American universities have emphasised the differences between expectations when writing in different subject areas. Indeed, the overall focus of the US Writing across the Disciplines (WAC) and Writing within the Disciplines (WID) movements has been the relationship between writing and learning in specific disciplines and the link to study support (Russell et al 2009). The key ideas in both WAC and WID are that integrated experiences are preferable to separate writing provision (French 2011).

This contrasts, however, with the focus of study support in the UK. According to French (2011), this support has been separated from the academic work of departments leading to an approach which can be critiqued for separating thinking from writing. Lea and Street (1998) also noted that support is usually given only for the surface features rather than the underlying principles of the disciplines. For example, students writing in an applied or professional multi-disciplinary context may need very different support and advice from those writing in traditional disciplines such as History, Science or Law. In addition, in the UK, there has been a disconnection between support for speakers of English as a foreign language carried out in special units and study skills support through student support services often characterised as remedial (Wingate 2012).

Furthermore, many students consider that the world of academic writing is one which they struggle to access. Benson et al (1994) noted that initiation is largely by self-discovery rather than by a more direct form of teaching. Moreover, Ivanič and Lea (2006) argued that, in the UK, there has been an ad hoc approach to fixing problems with academic writing rather than integrating the teaching of writing into learning more generally. They claimed that a lack of integration of academic writing support and disciplinary teaching was the main critique of current practices. There continues to be a debate about perceiving academic writing as a student problem to be fixed as opposed to a new form of literacy to be taught in context (Knudsen 2013).

This may be changing, however, as rising numbers of students request help with writing skills from centralised university support centres (Barkas 2011). In addition, students are increasingly adopting a consumerist approach and expecting value for money which includes the provision of 'sufficient' advice and support in the area of academic writing. Indeed, The National Student Survey (NSS) (2013) has highlighted this right to advice and support with academic studies through the wording of its questions to final year students. Furthermore, data from the NSS has highlighted a strong correlation between the academic support category in the survey and overall satisfaction (Gaffney-Rhys and Jones 2008). It would seem that academic writing support will become increasingly important as higher education institutions respond to the feedback received from the NSS survey. In summary, there are a range of complexities around academic writing and tensions to be resolved with regard to the nature and extent of support provision offered.

## **2.5 Research studies on learning and writing in higher education**

Ivanič and Lea (2006) explained that the tensions described above between different approaches to teaching academic writing are informed, at least in part, by different traditions of research into student learning. These scholars note a body of research which arose in the 1980s and 1990s in Northern Europe which was concerned more generally with student learning. These studies, in the phenomenographic tradition, often focused on student learning in higher education (see Gibbs 1995 and Marton et al 1997). In a particularly influential example, Gibbs (1995) attempted to distinguish between what he called 'deep' and 'surface' learning. According to Gibbs, students who seek understanding have a deep approach whilst those who see tasks as requiring reproduction of knowledge have a surface approach. Attempts to understand learning in higher education from the perspective of the student were also particularly significant. For example, Hounsell (1997) researching from this tradition in the UK focused on the context of academic learning and investigated how quality learning can be enabled within a disciplinary community. In particular, he drew on student views. Phenomenographic studies highlighted the situated nature of learning in higher education focusing on the student voice. However, the critique of this tradition is that little account is taken of identity and issues of language in the student experience of learning. According to Ivanič and Lea (2006), *academic*

*literacies* research has attempted to fill this gap since the mid 1990s offering an alternative way of viewing student writing but also taking a different approach to learning and teaching in higher education. It is at this point in the chapter that I will focus more specifically on *academic literacies* and their relationship to the New Literacy Studies (NLS).

## **2.6 Academic Literacies and New Literacy Studies (NLS)**

The term 'academic literacies' has been used in the UK since the mid 1990s and is focused on theoretical approaches to student writing (Lillis 2006). Ganobcsik-Williams (2006) noted that the notion of 'academic literacies' developed from the perspective of New Literacy Studies (NLS). In summary, NLS challenged the dominant cognitive paradigm of literacy and developed a practice theory in which literacies were seen as socially situated and plural, (more detail is included about the NLS in chapter 3). Working within this tradition, academic literacies researchers (see Baynham 2000; Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001) have maintained that the existing approach to the teaching of academic writing in UK Higher Education is based on a skills model. These scholars argued that writing should be seen not just as a skill but as a complex, contextually based set of meaning-making practices (Gourlay 2009). This view has developed into a key focus for research into student literacy practices.

The study of academic writing, which had previously drawn on influences such as the phenomenographic tradition or the genre approach (see above), took a different direction with the advent of this academic literacies approach. In particular, the influential study that introduced the term academic literacies was that of Lea and Street (1998). Lea and Street argued that university conceptions of student literacy have tended to focus around two approaches: a study skills approach in which deficit skills are remediated and a socialisation approach in which students 'absorb' academic reading and writing proficiency through immersion. Lea and Street proposed a third category, that of 'academic literacies'. They argued that this approach draws upon and yet moves beyond either a skills or socialisation model (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006). The model is a significant one and is built upon in subsequent work as exemplified below.



Academic literacies, according to Jones et al (1999), Ivanić (1998) and Lea (1999). are concerned with issues of identity and power and should be seen from a cultural and social perspective. Jones et al (1999) argued that an academic literacies approach views universities as 'constituted in and as sites of discourse and power' (Jones et al 1999: xxi). In other words, in universities, there is a taken for granted assumption about the nature of academic literacy which exerts a powerful effect on students. This means that the academic literacies field of study is an oppositional one. It arose in an attempt to reform higher education and resist entrenched views about writing practices, students and disciplines. It attempted to move beyond deficit models of literacy highlighting the complexity of literacies in relation to learning (Russell et al 2009).

I will now turn my attention to a more detailed discussion of some academic literacies studies and characterise their main features. A significant number of studies took place in the late 1990s with a focus on practice-based research and literacy theory. A key focus in the studies was the attempt to give a voice to students whilst emphasising their lack of power. For instance, Lillis (1999) researched the perspective of students recruited as part of the widening participation agenda and discussed what she calls the 'institutional practice of mystery' (Lillis 1999: 127) This is explained as a lack of clarity about terminology and practices leading to a situation where students cannot explore their identity as learners. This is a persuasive view but does perhaps underplay students' own agency. An alternative perspective is provided by Biesta and Tedder (2007) who argued that an individual learning in a particular context can respond with some agency to the sort of institutional discourses described by Lillis (1999). In Biesta and Tedder's study, narrative research is seen as a vehicle for learning about the possibilities of more agentic actions. The authors focused on the notion of 'learning to change' which contrasts with the students' sense of powerlessness in Lillis's study.

Additional studies examined in detail the struggle students have with making meaning whilst taking into account their own identity and the power of the institution. Ivanić (1998) conceptualised academic literacies as powerful

discourses arguing that writing mediates learning and that we develop our academic identity through writing (Ivanić 1998). Her significant monograph was influenced by critical linguists such as Fairclough (1989) and drew on practitioner-based collaborative research with mature-age students. It led to greater insights into the central nature of identity when considering student writing and challenged higher education institutions to value the diversity of knowledge and learning that new entrants bring. This is very important if the identity shifts associated with entry to higher education constitute a 'rite of passage' as Spurin (2012) suggested. Spurin argued that study at this level has a huge impact on identity and self-confidence and there are crucial times in which commitment is formed as study commences.

Lillis (2001), in a longitudinal study of non-traditional students, challenged contemporary approaches to writing in HE. She provided in depth explorations of the students' literacy practices connected with academic writing and located her study in the NLS tradition. She used the term 'essayist literacy practice' and argued that there is a fundamental tension between the students' desire to express themselves and the regulation of the institution. This regulation relates to social class, race and ethnicity. For example, student writers, according to Lillis, felt that formal wording relates to social status, yet, in their attempts to use phrasing which was not their own, they often produced meaningless text. Other participants in Lillis's study described how they imagine themselves as white in order to disguise their black bilingual selves. These kinds of situations, as described by Lillis, undermine meaning making and create 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. Lillis analysed texts in detail as well as drawing on interview data in order to problematise and challenge institutional views on student writing.

Lillis's (2001) argument was that current approaches continue the kind of elitist practices highlighted by Bourdieu et al (1996). She suggested that a more dialogical approach to teaching writing was needed. Lillis argued that different types of talk between tutors and students enabled student writers to participate in unfamiliar practices and collaborate in meaning making and take some control over the writing process. Certainly, Lillis formulated helpful principles for student writing pedagogy although, as she explained, further explorations of

how these would operate in practice still needed to be carried out. Indeed, many of the studies in the field crystallised the difficulties students have in making sense of unfamiliar practices and the differences in interpretation between staff and students (Lea and Street 1998; Lea and Stierer 2000). This was very helpful in highlighting the issues but there would seem to have been greater emphasis on identifying problems rather than on providing suggested solutions.

A more recent study drawing on the academic literacy field (Barton et al, 2007) gave more focus to implications and solutions. This wide ranging research project was not focused on higher education but was based on adult learning and the Skills for Life strategy in the UK (DfEE 2001). Skills for Life has also previously been referred to as 'basic skills'. The research project centred on the interaction between studying and students' lives. Barton et al critiqued some of the dominant discourses which position people as needing to learn a set of skills. The framing for the study drew on some of the research in the academic literacies tradition but it also had a wider frame encompassing not only language and literacy but also numeracy and teaching and learning. The study explored students' life histories, their current practices and identities, their life circumstances and events and their imagined futures. Its focus was not solely on academic writing but on a wider definition of literacy practices. In addition, it moved on from some of the earlier academic literacies studies in that it aimed not only to gain a broader understanding but also:

aimed to draw out the implications of this work for pedagogy... outlining principles for teaching which take account of and build on the resources people bring with them from their lives (Barton et al 2007: 8).

Barton et al's (2007) study was an example of a more recent move to draw from research findings in the field of academic literacies and attempt to impact curriculum design. Lillis (2003) identified this issue noting the need to progress from a critique of the current approaches to academic literacies to designing new pedagogies. Lea (2004) began to address this through her study focusing on higher education and what she calls 'a pedagogy of course design' (p742) which moved beyond some of the limitations of the academic literacies field. These limitations were characterised by Lea (2004) as; a tendency to focus on

non-traditional student groups and on assignment writing. Her argument was that there was a need to focus more broadly on the workings of academic literacy practices. Drawing on a case study, she provided some principles for course design including the notion that students should be participants in the construction of knowledge. Lea and Street (2006), in a further study, drew on the academic literacies model in a practical situation tutoring students in transition between school or college and higher education in the UK.

Despite these critiques, this tradition of academic literacies research has been an influential one and has challenged the skills-based model of literacy learning in higher education. Furthermore, academic literacies research is working to change the view that literacy should not need attention in higher education. However, as has been outlined above there are critics who note that emphasis on pedagogical change needs to be foregrounded in order for these ideas to take root. Wingate (2012), for example, argued cogently that despite the groundbreaking nature of the academic literacies approach, universities have not moved beyond a remedially focused, deficit -based study skills focus in practice. Russell (2009) contended, in similar vein, that the focus of academic literacies studies is on explanation and theorisation rather than a more practical pedagogical approach.

## **2.7 The limitations of the academic literacies field**

In this chapter I have reviewed the movement from general consideration of reading and writing at higher education level to the notion of academic literacies and the contribution this research has made to our understanding and conceptualisation of literacy practices. However, this particular field does leave some gaps for further investigation. According to Lea (2004) research in the academic literacies field has greatly supported understanding about the links between writing and learning. However, Lea summarised some of the limitations of the movement. In her view, the first shortcoming was that the studies provided insufficient emphasis on the implications for actual teaching and learning as explicated above. A further critique was that the studies focused primarily on non-traditional students. Her argument was that this perhaps led to slow implementation for all students across universities. Lea argued that this

tendency to focus studies on particular, often marginalised, groups might have masked the implications of the studies across higher education more generally.

A further significant limitation is that *writing* was the key focus of research in the academic literacies tradition. Whilst the term academic *literacies* was used, in fact, the studies were almost exclusively about academic *writing*. It can be argued that the term academic literacies has been conceived rather narrowly as academic writing and has focused, in particular, on the sorts of written assignments used in student assessment. This has proved to be a valuable starting point for studies. However, a much broader definition of the term academic literacies is now needed that moves beyond an emphasis on writing.

My reading of the literature on academic literacies influenced the construction of the research questions. In particular, the emphasis in the field on foregrounding student voices encouraged me to focus on student perceptions. This led to the first question: How do undergraduate Education Studies students make sense of academic literacies? In addition, in order to address the gap in the literature mentioned above, in the second question I asked: How do undergraduate Education Studies students integrate academic literacies into their own lives? The focus in this question is on broader literacy lives rather than a sole focus on academic writing.

## 2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the academic literacies movement. This arose in response to a changing higher education environment including an unparalleled rise in student numbers many of whom were the first generation to enter university. There has been a significant amount of work carried out in this academic literacies field. This work has offered alternative views in which literacy is seen as a complex social practice in opposition to the dominant view of literacy as a skill. However, studies have tended to focus almost exclusively on academic writing. This leaves a gap which this study attempts to address by considering the broader context in which students' academic literacies take place. The next chapter moves on from the specific sphere of academic literacies literature to review studies which have informed the underpinning theoretical framework of the study.

### **3. Theoretical perspectives – New Literacy Studies (NLS)**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to locate the study in a theoretical paradigm. As explored in the introduction, the study focused on a broad view of literacy lives and was rooted in a socio-cultural approach to literacy, drawing on the work of scholars such as Heath (1983), Street (1984), Gee (1990) and Barton and Hamilton (1998). This approach is now commonly referred to as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and is 'new' in the sense that it emerged to provide fresh perspectives on the study of literacy practice. In this chapter I will review the influence of the NLS and Street's (1984) distinction between literacy as ideological and autonomous. I will then consider how these ideas have diverged. For example, there have been recent developments in the arenas of academic, multi-modal, digital and globalised literacies. Over the last decade NLS has included a 'spatial turn' in which ideas about space and time and literacy have been fore-grounded (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Population mobility and new developments in technology have contributed to these discussions and so this chapter concludes with a focus on notions of time and space connected with literacy. In particular, time is foregrounded as being significant and will be returned to later in the study as part of the analysis of data.

#### **3.2 The influence of NLS**

Street (2003) summarised the focus of NLS as a new critical tradition which considered not only literacy as a social practice but also 'the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power.' Street (2003:1). This section and those following will consider this complexity in greater detail.

The epistemology of this study has been influenced by scholars working in this NLS tradition who are interested in researching what are known as literacy practices and who emphasise the contextual nature of knowledge and learning. This concept of 'practice' is a key idea in socio-cultural theories and was defined in relationship to literacy practice by Barton and Hamilton (1998) thus:

Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of using written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy (Barton and Hamilton 1998:7).

Reckwitz (2002) provided a broader definition of *social* practices arguing that there is a family of theories focused on practice which emphasise human and social agency. In addition, he maintained that practices have become abstracted as governing principles that are represented in events. This idea is explored in more detail in the next section. NLS researchers, writing from a socio-cultural perspective, emphasised the significance of *literacy* practices and provided concrete, local examples rooted in social contexts e.g., Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Barton et al (2000). These scholars drew on ethnographic methodologies and used situational textual analysis as a way of exemplifying the social, cultural and political bases of text production. These contextual studies provided insights into identity or identities and relationships to literacy practices and raised interesting questions about the nature of literacy lives.

### 3.3 Literacy events and practices

The term literacy practice has already been emphasised. Yet a socio-cultural perspective offers two important distinctions: literacy practices *and* literacy events (Street 2003). The notion of a literacy event or occurrence has been taken from Heath's (1983) study described below. Her definition of literacy events was: 'any action sequence involving one or more persons, in which the production and or consumption of print plays a role' (Heath 1983:386). The concept of 'practices' that are constituted through events is a broader notion which includes ongoing literacy routines and traditions. From a socio-cultural perspective, literacy is viewed as comprising both practices and events.

In a classic ethnographic study in the United States, Heath (1983) focused on community contexts and what she called 'ways with words'. This study illustrated that communities can have rich and interesting literacy practices but the difference between home and dominant literacy practices can be constituted as a deficit. In her examples home literacy practices were not congruent with school literacy. Heath contrasted a black community –Trackton- with a white working class community- Roadville. She demonstrated that literacy practices are culturally patterned and determined and that the home practices of the non-mainstream communities were out of kilter with school practices. According to

Hall (2003), Heath's research signalled the danger of assuming there is a 'natural' language learning condition in the home environment which all should aspire to.

Heath's work encouraged other researchers to look more closely at children's broader literacy practices using a socio-cultural perspective. There are many recent studies which explore the relationships between children's home or vernacular literacy practices and school literacies. Hull and Schultz (2001) writing from a US perspective have reviewed a range of research on out of school literacies and concluded that we should view non-mainstream practices as not deficient but just different. They note the danger of reifying what they term 'schooled' notions of literacy. In general, the studies they discussed have revealed that these 'schooled' definitions of literacy can be too limiting and can ignore rich home-based practices. Further UK based studies came to similar conclusions. For example, Burnett and Myers (2002) investigated children's practices using photographic evidence and unearthed a plethora of interesting results highlighting both continuities and discontinuities between the two contexts. In a further study (Burnett et al 2006), children collected shoe boxes of objects which represented their rich literacy lives. These studies moved away from a sole focus on classroom learning towards a broader exploration of learning in families and communities. They highlighted the notion of multiple literacies and considered what resources children bring to the classroom. In many cases, the impetus was to suggest how these vernacular literacies can be brought into school to enhance academic literacy learning (Purcell-Gates 2007). However, Hull and Schultz (2001) argued that if school appropriates more subversive forms these will lose their appeal and will eventually become mainstream practices themselves.

This rewarding tradition of research into children's literacy practices, as described above, illustrates the application of a socio-cultural approach. In addition, these studies have significance for this study despite the fact that my focus is on Higher Education students rather than children. My own study foregrounds students' academic literacy practices and how these practices relate to what can be seen as an autonomous view of literacy existing within the academy (explained in section 3.5).



### 3.4 Literacy singular or plural?

Many educationalists have assumed that literacy is a single or unitary 'thing'. Writers often confidently refer to a single 'literacy' which it is assumed readers will recognise (Lambirth 2005). Lambirth provided several examples of this unproblematic use of the term from writers discussing assessment of 'literacy', the success of a 'literacy' campaign, the challenge of teaching 'literacy' and how scholars work in early 'literacy'. In all these examples the singular term is used whereas, from a socio-cultural view, literacy is seen not as a singular thing but in the plural as 'literacies' (Lankshear and Knobel 2011). Indeed Scribner and Cole (1981) provided a persuasive argument that 'literacies' in the plural comprise contextual practices that people *engage* in rather than skills that they apply. In particular, the work of Street (1984) has contributed to an understanding of the notion of multiple literacies constructed in particular contexts and situations. These literacies according to Street are routines that people engage in at home, socially or through their work or learning environment.

### 3.5 Ideological and autonomous literacy

Not only did Street (1984) contribute to a view of literacy as a plural concept, he also coined two terms: 'ideological' and 'autonomous' literacy. Street's (1984) study, 'initiated a paradigmatic revolution' which counteracted a skills-based notion of literacy (Bartlett and Holland, 2002: 11), by arguing that literacy is always embedded within social institutions and is bound by particular political, cultural and historical contexts. The term 'ideological' (Street 1984) refers to the interactions of power around reading and writing. The term 'autonomous' (Street 1984) refers to a view in which literacy is seen as a unitary concept without reference to contexts. An autonomous view works from the assumption that literacy will affect individual cognition and success in the world leading, for example, to an improved economic position (Street 2005). According to Street (1984), there are assumptions in the autonomous model presented as if the views are neutral and taken-for-granted. Street (1984) argued that we need to reconceptualise literacy as an 'ideological' construct as opposed to an autonomous skill. This re-conceptualisation of the notion of literacy is one of the key reasons why a socio-cultural research approach is significant. Research from a social practice perspective challenged a skills based standpoint and

suggested that autonomous views of literacy are dominating institutional educational practices imposing particular conceptions of literacy. For example, this study emphasises a broader understanding of literacy practices in their social and cultural contexts moving beyond an autonomous conception of literacy, as a neutral and technical skill.

### 3.6 Literacy and identity work

The way we behave, interact, think, value, believe speak and write are all according to Gee (2012) accepted as examples of performing particular identities. This notion of performing identity was also emphasised by Moje and Luke who cited Norton and Toohey (2009: 415):

When a language learner writes a poem, a letter, or an academic essay, she considers not only the demands of the task but how much of her history will be considered relevant to this literacy act. Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks.

This quotation emphasises the idea of production of identity through literacy practices or literacy practices as a way of exploring identity. Identity is seen as not only multiple and malleable but is also about an individual taking an *active* part in producing and performing their own identities to influence their social world. From this position, according to Greenhow and Robelia (2009) identity is, 'dynamic, self-reflective and performative, rather than something that just is, or that we develop into and sustain' (2009: 123-4).

Similarly, Holland et al (1998) argued that people build or present dynamic stories about themselves in social and cultural contexts. In other words identities are produced with some degree of agency. Focus was directed on identities performed through action by means of a process of what Holland et al (1998) called 'authoring'. As these writers suggested, there is an ongoing process of active production and mediation of identity even though the possibilities of authoring are bounded by constraints and the need to draw on existing materials.

Moje et al (2009) drawing on a number of theoretical traditions also suggested that the concept of identity is an active one focused on the metaphor of identity as narrative. They suggested that this metaphor is a prominent one with theorists who have argued that identities are not only represented but are constructed in and through stories. What is particularly significant here is the notion of the narrative production of identity at *two* levels. Moje et al (2009) argued that people narrate stories and also perform their identity concurrently. The context and interaction with the audience are as significant as the narrative itself. Certainly, in this study participants narrated their stories whilst also performing their identities during the interview situation.

Pahl and Rowsell (2012) also discussed the active nature of literacy and identity from the view point of New Literacy Studies (NLS) arguing that ideas about identity are central to research and theory in this field. They emphasised that an important idea in the NLS is a shift from viewing identities as individually produced to viewing identities as *in practice* (Pahl and Rowsell 2012). The authors noted that not only do we express identity through language but also 'through our dress, our artefacts, our web presence, etc. In other words, we create our identity through our social practices' (Pahl and Rowsell 2012: 114). The notion of actively performing identity is a significant one. Indeed, Leander (2002:198), amongst others, critiqued essentialist ideas of 'identity-as-thing'. He noted that, from a practice perspective, the focus of analysis should no longer be the person but the activities through which the individual's identities are being produced.

Many studies have focused on this notion of literacy identities in practice. Examples include research focused on digital literacy and identity (Merchant 2004; 2006; Davies 2012) studies comparing the disjuncture between schools and everyday literacies (Moje et al 2004) and studies in classrooms (Hirst 2004; Leander 2002). In addition, Rowsell and Pahl (2007) and Pahl (2007) introduced the notion of sedimented identities in relation to literacy practices. This concept is used to describe how aspects or layers of identities can be found in texts or drawings. This notion can also be applied to artefacts or narratives and emphasises the multi-faceted complexity of identity work.

Furthermore, studies of identity formation and literacy in the NLS tradition have been carried out in further and higher education contexts. For example, Ivanič's (1998) study focused on the representation of identities through academic writing. Ivanič suggested that the self represented in academic writing seems alien to students and argued that academic writing poses particular problems and identity conflict. Similarly Lillis (2001) discussed how students' social and personal identities are bound up with academic meaning making. In fact, in both studies, the authors argued that existing practices related to specific ideas about literacy achievement privilege particular kinds of identities and exclude others. Both higher education and earlier school-based systems position certain student identities over other identities. As McCarthy and Moje (2002) explained, available literacy practices can constrain and undermine identities as well as providing chances to acquire new identities.

The emphasis on active production of identity led to the use of the term 'identity work' in many studies, for example Bartlett (2005), Merchant (2005) and Comber and Nixon (2004). Using this term emphasises the dynamic nature of identity and avoids discussing the notion of 'identity formation' which can suggest the idea that there is a linear process of formation. For example, Gee (2012) discussed the development of what he calls 'primary discourses' learnt early in life and providing an enduring sense of self (2012:53). These primary discourses could also be termed primary or initial identities. Following the formation of primary discourses, according to Gee, is the development of 'secondary discourses' (Gee 2012:54) and therefore the formation of different identities as individuals come across other cultural models. McCarthy and Moje (2002) noted that this is perhaps a hierarchical view of identity formation in which an initial identity is formed leading to later and different secondary formations.

Identity work is the term I chose to use in this study because of the emphasis on the active production of identity or identities.

### **3.7 New directions in NLS**

Tusting et al (2000) noted that NLS could be seen as being at a crossroads with new themes and foci emerging as the twenty first century began. Writing a few years later Street (2003) summarised a new focus for NLS beyond theoretical

critiques to research with practical applications in education. In addition, he noted the increasing significance of critical literacy in, for example, the work of Luke and Freebody (2002) concentrating on interrogating texts as repositories of power differentials. Multimodal literacies have been a further focus taking into account the shift from written to visual texts. For instance, Pahl and Rowsell (2010) described participatory multimodal practices. In addition, as a result of the increasing focus on electronic texts and immersive environments there has continued to be a spotlight on digital literacy (see Merchant 2009). Moreover, globalisation and the disjuncture between a focus on the local and the global have become of increasing interest to NLS scholars (see for example Brandt and Clinton 2002). These authors argued that it is impossible to study local literacies without taking account of the global.

### 3.8 Space/place and time

Theoretical perspectives have diversified and recently there has been a growth in NLS research focused on complex ideas about space or place and how these notions interact with literacies (Leander and Sheehy 2004). According to Scollon and Scollon (2003) spaces or places help to create human identities and *where* literacy practices take place becomes an important part of meaning. Yet defining the difference between space and place is problematic. Space is generally seen as a more abstract concept than place although Cresswell (2004) called place itself a 'slippery' notion and acknowledged that people use the terms 'space' and 'place' interchangeably. However, theorisations about literacy and space are currently taking place and include investigations of classroom spaces, (Leander and Sheehy 2004; Clark 2010; Burnett 2011) and online, off-line spaces (Leander and McKim 2003). This research has been valuable in exploring how literacy events are not just located in places but help to generate the nature and quality of space.

Rowe (2008) is a socio-cultural scholar interested in the interface of space and literacy practices. She drew on LeFebvre's work to argue that spatial and material situations shape literacy events. Her study was based on young children but has implications for researching at higher education level. For example, according to Rowe, writing and reading events in a library may take a different form from those happening in an intimate social environment. Rowe

argued that because material space shapes literacy practices, spatial analysis is required to understand the way human beings coordinate and are coordinated (Gee 2001). According to Rowe (2008) literacy practices involve a mixture of values, social situations, physical objects and spaces all of which need to be taken into consideration from a socio-cultural viewpoint. Her work was of particular importance in shaping this study. Her notion of the significance of *material*, *spatial* and *embodied* aspects of literacy practices informed the design of interviews and led to participants being asked to bring along objects and visual materials. More detail is included in sections 5.4 and 5.5.

The NLS focuses on time as well as space dimensions. Tusting (2000) explored some of the implications for viewing time as an important aspect of literacy practices. Compton-Lilly (2008) discussed literacy research studies which have drawn on time as a theoretical lens. However, her view is that the studies have mainly focused on longitudinal projects or the socio-historical nature of experiences. Compton-Lilly's own research drew on timescales to make sense of one student's experience as a reader in terms of three notions of timescales: those of history from previous generations; those of more recent family timescales; and what Compton-Lilly called 'ongoing' time scales around the time she carried out the interviews. According to Compton Lilly (2008) we draw on past experience to account for the present and to project into the future. Her work drew on Lemke (2001) who used timescales to explain how identity develops longitudinally. He argued that identity formation cannot happen over short time spans. He challenged views of time as linear and forward moving. Instead, Lemke suggested we experience time as recursive, for example, we embed experiences from the past into the present. In particular, past experiences are then responsible for taken-for-granted views.

Some scholars have focused on time and space as separate aspects providing interesting insights into the interface between literacy and time or space. However, focusing on just one of these dimensions can mean that some of the complex interrelationships are ignored. Other scholars have drawn on the notion of 'time-space' or 'space-time'. They have considered time and space to be inseparable and interrelated. Each is seen as a necessary constituent of the other. For example, Leander (2001) analysed an extended school trip drawing on theories of what he calls 'space-time' production. Leander and McKim

(2003) explored space as fluid and multiple, linked to time dimensions and drawing on multiple resources related to power and agency. In their view possibilities always exist of change and reconstruction because of this focus on space-time. In a noteworthy example, Burgess (2010) discussed educational contexts in relation to time and space making the point that context is not bounded but includes connections to other spaces and times. From this viewpoint time and space are interlinked and socially produced.

### 3.9 Chronotope

In this study I was interested in both time and space so drew on the Bakhtinian concept of the *chronotope* which literally means 'time-space'. Bakhtin (1981) argued that it was, in particular, notions of time and space that made narrative events concrete. He defined chronotopes as, 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' Bakhtin (1981:84). In his much cited essay Bakhtin (1981) analysed novel genres and the role chronotopes play in each genre. For example, he described the ancient adventure novel which contains what he terms 'adventure time'. This makes no references to everyday aspects of time. In adventure time the hero moves through time and space drawing on significant objects towards a destination.

Bakhtin discussed chronotopes in the context of literary criticism. However, the concept has been applied across other fields, in particular within educational research in the NLS tradition. Hirst (2004) drew on chronotopes to analyse the role temporal and spatial practices played in establishing power relations in a particular classroom in which global relations and social identities intermingled. Van Enk (2007) used chronotopes as a tool for analysing how adult learners' relationships to literacy are accounted for in often tacit conceptions of time and space. She noted that through this lens narratives can be analysed in terms of what they suggest about how things might have been or might yet be different.

### 3.10 How the NLS relates to this study

In investigating the literacy lives of a small group of undergraduates this study draws on theoretical traditions associated with the NLS paradigm. 'What people do with literacy' (Barton and Hamilton 1998:7) or the concept of literacy practices is significant as well as an emphasis on the contextual nature of

literacies. The notions of material, spatial and embodied aspects of literacy practices identified by Rowe (2008) helped to inform the design of the study. Other ideas are drawn on in later chapters. For example, a focus on identities helped to illuminate the multi-faceted nature of the students' experience and the complexity of both narrating and performing identity work. The theme of the chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) and the notion of timescales (Lemke 2001) are explored in order to examine academic literacies as situated practice operating across peoples' lives. Time-space concepts have helped to highlight how academic literacies are positioned amongst shifting practices and connect in multiple ways to other contexts across times and locations. These concepts will be examined in greater detail in later chapters as part of data analysis and findings.

### **3.11 Chapter summary**

This chapter has considered the underpinning ideas of the NLS. Work of significant contributors has been evaluated and key ideas summarised. In particular, the sections on identity work, space/place and time and chronotopes will have significance in later parts of the thesis. The study is situated within the NLS theoretical frame so this chapter has provided the necessary contextual background. The chapter that follows explores theoretical ideas in relation to the methodology of the study.



## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

As outlined earlier, this study aimed to explore how students make sense of academic literacies and how they integrate these literacies into their everyday lives. Chapter 3 provided an overview of the New Literacy Studies which supplies much of the theoretical background to the study. Using this work as an underpinning structure, I wanted to explore how and where this 'academic literacy' happens and how it interacts with students' personal histories and their broader socio-cultural experience. The study itself is based on semi-structured interviews and visual material brought to these interviews by five students studying in their second year for the award of BA in Education Studies.

A helpful starting point for the research process is to consider the most appropriate research paradigm to adopt. According to Grix (2002), the crucial question is: what is the nature of social reality to be investigated? Any choice of paradigm is related to a researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality including what kind of knowledge is sought. The methodology should then make sense in terms of this positionality. In this study, I adopted a qualitative and interpretive position which recognises that there are no objective 'truths' that can be 'discovered'. However, within this broad philosophy of person-centred 'subjective' research there are many traditions. For example Cresswell (2007) discussed traditions such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Within these qualitative traditions commentators have noted tensions between concerns for flexibility and concerns about consistency and coherence (Holloway and Todres 2003). On the other hand, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005:4), there are moves to mingle and synthesise paradigms in what the authors referred to as 'bricolage'. By this they mean piecing together different methodological practices while retaining a focus on appropriateness for purpose. In this study I drew on the notion of bricolage appropriate to small scale qualitative research.

My aim was to study the lived experiences of students' academic literacy practices. I intended to focus on the socially constructed nature of reality and

attempt to capture individual participants' points of view drawing on rich descriptions of their lives through semi-structured interviews and visual methodologies. In essence, the epistemological position I took was one that recognised the contextual and constructed nature of reality. The study was influenced by the phenomenological tradition, by a social constructionist view of interviewing, by a reflexive methodological approach and notions of narrative inquiry. In addition, my approach to interpretation drew on work in grounded theory. By drawing on these different approaches I consider the study to be in Denzin and Lincoln's terms a 'bricolage.' The different perspectives, in particular phenomenology and a narrative approach supported a focus on subjective experience. Reflexive perspectives also enabled some of the challenges of researcher positionality and power to be considered. Grounded theory provided opportunities for themes to emerge from a close study of the data.

All of these traditions or approaches have had an influence on the methodology of this study bearing in mind an aim to retain a focus on the appropriateness for purpose as discussed above. In what follows, I will explore these perspectives picking up some of the tensions between the approaches and how these might be resolved

#### **4.2 A phenomenological approach**

As I was committed to gaining participants' perspectives I drew partly from a phenomenological perspective. Indeed, this kind of study according to Cresswell (2007) would describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. The focus is therefore on description rather than on explanation and this seemed appropriate in this case. In particular, in transcendental phenomenology rooted in the work of Husserl (1931), the emphasis is on clarifying what Husserl called the 'essence' of life. Schutz (1967) was a significant phenomenological theorist who located his work in the Husserlian tradition whilst placing this in a sociological frame (Wallace and Wolf 2006). Schutz's (1967) focus was on understanding human consciousness and the structure of everyday life. He argued that we need to focus on the way that the 'life world' or 'taken for granted' world is experienced by individuals (Holstein and Gubrium 2005). In order to study this 'taken for granted' world, Schutz developed Husserl's ideas of bracketing. Schutz

suggested we should 'bracket' or set aside belief in the world's reality in order to study it more clearly.

I have taken account of bracketing in this study but am also aware of critiques of this practice. For example, LeVasseur (2003) argued that it is impossible to completely 'bracket' out experience and noted that the assumptions of the researcher inevitably get in the way. The aim behind my study was to develop a picture of the 'essence' of participants' experience of academic literacies whilst attempting to 'bracket out' my own experiences as far as possible. However, I also aimed to focus on the role of the researcher in constructing meaning and to reflect on the processes happening within the research situation itself. For example, I wrote the following in a reflective journal entry (see appendix 7.3):

One of the things I did which I haven't done much before was to check back as to whether I was interpreting what Bella said effectively. I'm not sure whether this entirely worked or not. On one occasion Bella said that I had put her thoughts into words more effectively than she had herself. I was worried that I was in danger of influencing her and was not sufficiently distancing myself and bracketing out my own experience and views.

In the sections following I discuss some of the issues with bracketing in more detail.

Pure phenomenology, according to Barkway (2001) is a critical methodology that focuses on an individual's first hand, conscious experience. However, it can be argued that a study which focuses on respondents reporting their own experience is not phenomenological in the strictest sense. In particular Barkway claims that nursing studies have been conducted claiming to be phenomenological when in fact they are merely descriptive.

#### **4.3 A social constructionist approach**

I was aware throughout of particular tensions between a phenomenological enquiry and the notion of the social construction of knowledge (Burr 2003). In particular, the phenomenological emphasis on neutrality and essentialism contradicts the relativism of social constructionism in which meanings are seen as multiple and complex. Yet in order to gain access to the perspectives of participants and the kinds of essential meanings described above, I relied

primarily on a social constructionist approach to interviewing outlined by Kvale (1996). It is worth at this point briefly outlining the difference between social constructionism and constructivism as both terms are used in this chapter. Burr (2003) notes that social constructionism is an overall theory of knowledge which focuses on the *external* nature of social reality and takes an anti-essentialist stance. Constructivism is more individually based and is often applied in studies of learning focused on the individual's *internal* processes in constructing meaning (Young and Collin 2004).

My perspective on interviewing drew on a social constructionist approach viewing the interview as a social encounter rather than an impartial situation. I wanted participants to actively shape the course of the interview rather than be passive respondents. In order to give participants an active role they were asked to bring relevant objects and images to the interviews. This method is explained in detail in the next chapter. Considering the interview in this light, according to Kvale (1996), is a post-modern view point which emphasises the construction of knowledge and the interaction between the researcher and participants. I did not want interviewing to focus on 'neutral tools of data gathering' but 'negotiated contextually based results' (Fontana and Frey 2005:698). The intention was to gather rich description that provided an understanding of the participants' common experiences (Creswell 2007). Yet at the same time, from a phenomenological perspective the aim would be to set aside my presuppositions about academic literacies and the participants' broader lives and remain aware of how my own views might be colouring the interview process. From a social constructionist perspective, however, the aim was to be aware that we construct meaning through language and the interviewer's role is as significant as the participants. Although I attempted to set presuppositions aside and take account of bracketing, I was also aware that my interaction as an interviewer was part of the construction of meaning. For example, my laughter or sympathetic reaction was a response to eliciting humour or sympathy. In addition, in order to shift participants towards thinking about different features of their literacy experience, I asked them to talk about aspects such as identity and community so may have foregrounded these dimensions of their experience.

From a social constructionist viewpoint a researcher approaches the text of an interview not as a reflection of the real phenomenological experience of the participants but as an interaction constructed in a particular context (Cassell and Symon 2004). These are contradictory viewpoints yet I was aware that there were strengths both in focusing on essential experiences from a phenomenological viewpoint and allowing for many possible interpretations from a social constructionist perspective. I aimed to support participants in developing their own meanings during the process of interaction rather than uncovering existing meanings (Kvale, 1996). In addition, my own role in constructing meaning was fore-grounded through a reflexive approach to the research situation. I put aside time after each interview to reflect on a range of aspects. These reflections included ideas about emerging themes and thoughts about aspects not captured in oral language- for example, gestures, posture and atmosphere (see appendix 7.3). Furthermore, I noted and considered the data after recordings had finished and reflected on my own role in the interview process. Drawing on reflexive methodologies enabled me to consider which approach was most appropriate.

#### **4.4 A reflexive approach**

According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) a reflexive methodology is one way of integrating different approaches to methodology. The researcher can step back from the immediate situation and consider what influences are being drawn on and how their own role and positionality is having an effect on the empirical data. Reflexivity relates to the view that knowledge is co-constructed (Kvale 1996) and therefore the role of the researcher needs to be thought through carefully. A reflexive approach includes both in-depth consideration of findings and reflection on the process by which meanings have been created. As part of a reflexive approach the researcher's positionality is taken into account as well as the research context. The interviewer needs to consider herself both as a researcher and an individual in relation to the topic (Norris 1997) and the influence these positions have on the interview situation and other stages of the research process. Voicing assumptions is important so that these can be considered and challenged. In addition, the concept of 'bracketing' as explained in the section on phenomenology needs to be thought through at all points of the research process.

Indeed, in this study reflexivity allowed me to consider the tension described by Cresswell (2007) that arises when phenomenologists attempt to 'bracket' themselves out of the narrative and yet cannot ignore the effect that they have on the interview. I used research diary entries to reflect on the tension between attempting to build rapport with participants through interaction and moves to take a detached stance. Certainly it was important to be a good listener rather than a frequent speaker. Yet, I was aware of the importance of building a trusting relationship which over time seemed to provide greater depth of response from participants. In addition, I drew on an alternative interpretation of bracketing provided by LeVasseur (2003) which helped me to manage this conflict. LeVasseur noted the seemingly irreconcilable tension between what he terms an interpretive approach and descriptive phenomenology. He argued that phenomenology makes a clear distinction between the natural attitude or our everyday approach to life and the philosophical attitude which takes a reflective and questioning approach. He suggests that bracketing should only be applied to the natural attitude or 'to the ordinary lack of curiosity with which most of life is lived' (LeVasseur, 2003:417). With that in mind, I attempted to take this philosophical approach, questioning and reflecting on a range of influences, for example my role in the university and how my own comments, questions and responses may have affected the outcome as well as considering details such as timing, place, seating position, and any unexpected occurrences (see Appendix 9.3).

#### **4.5 A grounded theory approach**

Grounded theory is an approach that is used extensively in qualitative studies (Gibbs, 2007). It was originally defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as both a method and product of inquiry. Specifically, grounded theory provides helpful analytic guidelines through which theory can be built up in stages. In essence, theory emerges from the 'ground' or from the data itself in which it was 'grounded.' In contrast to traditional linear models of research it has what Flick (2009) calls 'circularity'. The approach is reflective and critical with a continuing cycle of questioning of analytical decision making. In addition, grounded theory recognises the value of small scale and case study research to generate rich data which is appropriate and relevant to this study.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) account described practical approaches for achieving a grounded analysis using open, axial and selective coding. Open coding aims to generate general theoretical ideas, axial coding is a refinement and development of these ideas and selective coding endeavours to identify core categories. In pure grounded theory as described by Strauss and Corbin, the researcher approaches the data 'inductively' setting aside any preconceived ideas. However, this notion has been critiqued (see Silverman 2006) for its failure to acknowledge that it is likely that all researchers start with implicit theories which guide their work in the early stages. Indeed, this was the case with this study; in particular, socio-cultural theories and New Literacy Studies influenced the structure of the three part interview schedule detailed in the next chapter.

A critique of grounded theory coding is that there is some lack of clarity as to whether the underpinning philosophy is interpretivist or positivist. An interpretivist approach seeks understanding of the world with a focus on subjective and negotiated meanings. Positivism takes a scientific, deterministic and logical approach (Cresswell, 2007). For example, according to Mills et al (2008:3), in Strauss and Corbin's work, language is employed that suggests positivist orientations by the use of phrases such as 'recognising bias' and 'maintaining objectivity.' Furthermore, the notion that theory can be 'discovered' also suggests that knowledge is an objective reality. Yet Charmaz (2006) described what she calls a 'constructivist' grounded theory approach which addresses some of these more positivist tendencies. In contrast to more traditional grounded theorists, she noted that constructivists view data analysis as a construction. Charmaz (2001) argued that constructivists are aware that data is located in time, place, culture and context and that theory is an inevitable part of enquiry.

Taking into account this study's aims and theoretical background, drawing on a constructivist grounded theory approach has advantages. It provides reflective and critical analytical approaches for interpreting qualitative data in line with the epistemology of the study which recognises knowledge as contextual and constructed. However, the methodology of this enquiry is not based entirely on constructivist grounded theory because it draws on a prior theoretical framework - the New Literacy Studies perspective. Using this kind of initial

frame would not be accepted by pure grounded theorists but is in line with Silverman's (2006) view that inevitably researchers start with some theories in mind. I did draw on a staged process to analysis based on grounded theory notions of coding which was helpful in ensuring a thorough, systematic and rigorous approach to interpreting data. This is detailed in section 5.10.

#### 4.6 A narrative approach

Riessman (2002) discussed the narrative turn in qualitative interviewing. She is a leading figure in this field focussing both on methodology and analysis of narrative research (2008; 2002; 1993). This kind of approach 'privileges positionality and subjectivity' (Riessman 2002:696). There is also a strong link in narrative work with notions of identity positioning. For example, Holland et al (1998) drew on personal stories and used the term 'narrativised identities' (1998:43). These authors made clear that perspectives change over time and the idea of 'voice' positions people and gives them the resources to recreate different positions. Indeed, in narrative research (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) the focus is on research 'with' rather than research 'on' participants. However, the definitions of 'narrative' are complex and can vary from a term assigned to any text to the notion of a narrative text used as a mode of inquiry. According to Cresswell (2007:54) narrative research 'can be both a method and *the phenomenon* of study'. My study was not strictly speaking a narrative one as it was not designed specifically to collect stories. Rather, the participants in this study, without necessarily being prompted to provide a story, gave extended accounts of their lives related to academic literacy. In particular, the emphasis on narrative came at the stage of analysis rather than at the stage of research design and was part of my approach to grounded theory which included identifying narrative units for analysis. (See 5.10 for more detail).

The particular definition of narrative I worked from was in line with Riessman's (2002) definition as containing some or all of the following: order and sequences; one action following from another; creating a plot drawing from the complexity of everyday life and containing temporal and spatial structures. I used this definition to support identification of narrative extracts under themes or codes as part of condensing the data set. This was in line with the purpose of the research to examine the context of students' academic literacies including



personal histories and broader experiences. Cresswell (2007) noted that often narrative research involves creating descriptions of themes across stories. My analytical strategy included this kind of paradigmatic thinking. However, I was aware of a tension between this kind of narrative practice and grounded theory. For example, some of the precise levels of coding involved in grounded theory would seem to contradict this narrative approach which dealt with large chunks of text identified as being narratives and to some extent ignored text that could not be described as being in story form.

It is also worth considering some of the critiques of narrative inquiry. One criticism cited by Connelly and Clandinin (2000) is that given that story is the unit of analysis in narrative inquiry it can be argued that narrative research is essentially about looking for a story. Connelly and Clandinin refuted this point and noted researchers from a narrative tradition are not just interested in stories but are trying to make sense of life as it is lived. The two researchers also noted the complexity of the threads of narrative and the need for a reflexive consideration of the relationship between living, telling, retelling and reliving. This relates to phenomenological notions of essential meaning and fits with the emphasis on reflexivity in this study. However, a further critique is the fundamental problem with what is 'truth' in considering narrative extracts from any set of data. Doyle (1997) discussing narrative research with teachers noted that critics of a narrative methodology argue that it is impossible to test or warrant the evidence from narratives. Doyle's point is that narrative research is a reaction to behavioural and experimental effectiveness studies which atomise learning and 'silence the voice of teachers' (Doyle 1997:95). Certainly, I was interested in hearing the voice of participants and what Doyle calls 'the illusive truth of image or symbol' (Doyle: 96). Riessman (2008) also cautioned that narrative is always situated and the particular context must always be evaluated and considered reflexively.

To sum up, although aspects of narrative research were drawn on particularly to analyse the data, this is not a narrative study. Indeed, some of the drawbacks of narrative research need to be considered alongside the other methodological approaches of the study.

#### 4.7 Justification of the 'bricolage' approach

I arrived at a hybrid approach to methodology rooted in my aim to study a small group of students' lived experiences of academic literacies. The study drew on a tradition of New Literacies research from a socio-cultural perspective explained in Chapter 3. It foregrounded the socially situated nature of participants' lives in relation to their academic literacy practices and focused on a broader context than students' written texts. The methodological perspectives taken relate to New Literacy Studies (NLS); phenomenology; social constructionist ideas; reflexive methodologies, grounded theory and narrative approaches. These approaches were mingled and synthesised into a 'bricolage' and each perspective offered advantages related to my initial aims. NLS provided the essential epistemology of the study. Phenomenology offered a focus on essential experience. Social constructionism helped me to recognise that meanings are co-constructed and influenced by contexts and levels of interpretation. A reflexive approach facilitated the identification of these layers of differing assumptions and interpretation. Reflection helped me to acknowledge some of the complexities of using narratives as a way of accessing human experience. Also, a constructivist grounded theory approach to interpretation complemented the theoretical position taken in the study that knowledge is both contextual and constructed. In particular, this approach supported a systematic and thorough review of the data. Furthermore, narrative approaches supported the analysis strategy in which narratives were extracted and descriptions of themes told across stories were examined.

#### 4.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approaches taken in this study and detailed how these approaches have been combined. In summary, the methodology is a bricolage of NLS theories, phenomenological orientations, social constructionist views, a reflexive orientation, grounded theory analysis and narrative approaches. The chapter which follows charts the detail of the research design sitting within these varied research paradigms.

## 5. Research design

### 5.1 Introduction

The study focused on five undergraduate students studying for a joint honours degree in Education Studies at one university in the UK. This chapter considers all aspects of the research design including an overview of the approach used to analysis. For ease of reference the aims, objectives and research questions are restated here:

#### *Aims and Objectives:*

- to describe and analyse students' narratives about academic literacies;
- to explore student perspectives of academic literacies;
- to consider the socio-cultural context in which students' academic literacies take place and the interrelationship between literacy practice and everyday life.

#### *Research questions:*

- How do undergraduate Education Studies students make sense of academic literacies?
- How do undergraduate Education Studies students integrate academic literacies into their own lives (their personal and academic lives)?

### 5.2 Summary of research design

Data collection was achieved through an interview-based approach. I conducted three phases of individual, semi-structured interviews drawing on different elicitation devices (see 5.5) and focusing on the broad context of students' academic literacies. The first interview focused on material objects, associated with students' experiences of literacies at university, the second on places in which academic literacies took place and the third focused on people associated with these literacies. In addition to interview data, perspectives were gained through analysis of the material brought to interviews, through two short diary entries completed by each student between meetings and through my own researcher reflective notes. Furthermore, the participants were involved in a review to respond to analysis.

Figure 1 summarises the research process including a preparation phase and three phases of interviews. Details are provided in section 5.4. This was

followed by a participant review of data during which participants commented on initial analysis. Peer review sessions were held at the end of the process to provide discussion and feedback as analysis progressed.

## **1. Preparation Phase**

- Pilot conducted Spring 2009.
- Sept/Oct 2010: letter distributed to all prospective BA Education Studies students inviting volunteers for study.
- Oct 2010: initial meeting to brief participants about the box of objects and list required for phase 1 interviews. Permissions form given out.
- Oct 2010: participants collected box of objects representing academic literacies. They also provided a list of the contents of the box.

## **2. Phase one interviews: box of objects used as a stimulus to explore academic literacy practices and preparation for Phase 2**

- Oct/Nov 2010: interviews based on objects.
- Briefing during the interview on requirements for second phase.
- Researcher reflective notes completed directly after interview.
- Dec/Jan 2010/11: transcribed phase 1 interviews.
- Dec 2010/Jan 2011: participants asked to write two short reflective diary entries on academic literacy practices as they prepare to submit semester 1 assignments.
- Jan/Feb 2011: participants asked to prepare visual material on the spatial locations of their academic literacy practices. These could be photos, film footage, sketches, maps or collages.

## **3. Phase two interviews: visual material used as a stimulus to discuss spatial locations and academic literacy practices. Diary entries discussed.**

- Feb 2011: interviews based on spatial locations.
- Briefing on third phase and sharing first thoughts on analysis.
- Researcher reflective notes completed directly after interview
- Feb/March 2011: participants asked to create a relationship map noting all the people who influence and support their academic literacies.
- March/April 2011: transcribed phase 2 interviews.

## **4. Phase three interviews: relationship map used as stimulus to describe the role of people who influence and support academic literacies**

- April 2011: interviews based on networks of people.
- Researcher reflective notes completed directly after interview
- July 2011: transcribed phase 3 interviews.

## **5. Participant review of data**

- Oct/Nov 2011: participant review of initial analysis.

## **6. Peer review of data**

- February 2012, May 2012, March 2013: peer review of data in educational research group with interested peers.

**Figure 1: Summary of research design**

### 5.3 Sampling process

The sample was a convenience sample of five students enrolled on an undergraduate Education Studies degree during the second year of their course. Four of the five students were female and all were white British. Three students were studying a BA in English and Education studies, one student was studying Education Studies and Sociology and another student was studying Education Studies, Psychology and Counselling. My initial aim was only to involve students on the courses I did not teach, in other words not students of English and Education Studies. However, I had to extend the invitation to participate to a wider group as otherwise I would have had only two participants.

I recognise that the research took place in a context in which I had a powerful insider position as a tutor and teacher. For example, one of my roles, during the study, was that of university lecturer in English and Education Studies. This meant that at times I taught three out of the five students in the study for one of their modules and knew some of the detail of their experience. However, it can be argued that my insider relationship allowed a depth of exploration that would not be possible for an outsider. In addition, the study allowed me to distance myself as the focus was *indirect*. I did not visit the library with the students or discuss an actual piece of academic writing. This allowed me to position myself as a researcher rather than as a tutor. In particular, the elicitation devices (see section 5.5) were a unique element of the study. They allowed students choice over what information they shared and enabled participants to roam widely in their description of their experience. I did continue to consider some of the difficulties with the sample and this is discussed further in the section on ethics.

Participants were self-selected. I visited each Education Studies teaching group to talk briefly about the project and asked for interested students to contact me. I asked for volunteers to contact me directly rather than expressing interest during the session in order to avoid any sense of pressure to be involved. In the end I met up with seven students, two of whom decided to withdraw.

There can be no attempt to suggest that this sample was representative of the whole cohort of Education Studies students. However, large proportions of the

students on these joint honours courses are white British, female and from a similar age profile. In this sample the students were not all straight from college or school but they were all under twenty five and therefore relatively young. As has already been stated, out of the five participants only one was male and this followed the pattern in the English and Education Studies cohort. Within this cohort out of 33 students only 15% were male (5 students); 6% were over 25 (2 students) and 6% were British Asian (2 students). My sample therefore had a similar relationship to the general population. However, in expressing interest in participating in this study, these students self-selected as being interested in their own development and learning which may have made a difference to the data in that insights were generated into a very particular kind of student experience

#### **5.4 Structure of the interviews and participant review**

As explained in chapter 3 this study is underpinned by a notion of literacy as a social practice. In particular, the study was designed to generate insights into social practice linked to identity, space and materiality. With that in mind three phases of interviews were planned to investigate the ways in which literacies are involved with actual objects, spaces and relationships with people. Interviews in phase 1 were linked to objects, in phase 2 to images connected with spaces and in phase 3 to images representing relationships with people. These ideas were drawn from Rowe's (2008) study of young children's literacy practices as explored in chapter 3. These objects and visual images and their relationship to Rowe's (2008) study are discussed in more detail in the next section. The pilot study, in which one set of interviews were carried out gave me insights which helped me to plan the final study. Although bringing objects to these pilot interviews was helpful, I realised that I needed to prepare more fully and allow more time immediately following each interview session for reflection. As a result, in this final study, I planned more thoroughly and ensured I kept detailed reflective notes following each interview.

In each case participants were asked to prepare materials in advance and these were discussed during interviews. After interviews had taken place, the sound recordings were all transcribed verbatim and objects brought to the interview were photographed or copied with the participants' permission. At the end of

the interviewing phase and as participants started their third and final year at university they were invited to a group session the purpose of which was a participant review. One session was planned but the participants were not all able to attend on the first date. As a result there were two sessions. During these sessions I shared initial views on analysis of data and participants wrote comments on thematic strands and then discussed their ideas with each other.

### 5.5 Visual methods and elicitation devices

Participants were asked to bring particular materials to each of the three interviews. These were as follows:

- 1) A box of objects representing academic literacy experiences;
- 2) Visual material focused on the spatial locations of academic literacy practices;
- 3) Relationship maps to describe the role of people who influenced and supported academic literacies.

I took the idea of using visual material from two sources. One was from the socio-cultural study by Rowe (2008) discussed in chapter 3. Rowe's study was framed by a theoretical structure which acknowledged the significance of literacy practices as *material, spatial and embodied*. She claimed that local literacies draw on the material, spatial and embodied resources that are at hand. This notion informed my decision to use objects and visual images as elicitation devices (the term is explained later in this section). The second source was a research project with primary school children that had included the use of a collection of objects in shoe boxes (Burnett et al 2006). In this study the objects enabled in-depth communication that was unlikely to have happened without these prompts.

Students, like children, use objects and spaces to enact literacy events. The students in the research study brought objects to the interviews which represented their academic literacies. The objects ranged from books and memory sticks to symbolic objects and pictures representing social networks. In addition, participants used images to discuss the ways in which they used



particular spaces, for example their bedrooms, to construct meaningful learning environments which connected their social and academic lives.

The purpose of the devices primarily was to encourage participants to talk in depth about their complex relationships with academic literacy experiences. Adler and Adler (2005) discussed the notion of overcoming interviewees' resistance, inability or unwillingness to talk. However, further justification included: a chance to think in advance about the topic; a 'warm-up' for the interview; a mechanism to encourage a deeper level of engagement; support in weaving a narrative; symbolic representations of academic literacies and finally the fore-grounding of participants' own viewpoints.

Elicitation device is a term used by Johnson and Weller (2002) who attempted to answer the question as to how interviewers encourage participants to reveal what they feel, think or believe. Writing from an anthropological perspective the authors suggested that the use of particular structures can be important in encouraging responses which access information that may otherwise be tacit and elusive. In addition, Adler and Adler (2005) noted that some interviewees are resistant or unwilling to talk. The authors suggested that social scientists have over the years, attempted to devise strategies to overcome this resistance. Johnson and Weller (2002:491) on the other hand focused more on accessing what they call 'unarticulated informant knowledge.' However, the devices they described are language focused rather than related to material objects or visual data. For example, they discussed the use of sentence frames completed by participants and the development of taxonomies or lists.

Banks (2008) also discussed elicitation devices from an anthropological tradition but focused on visual methodologies such as photographs, film and videotape. He noted that there are two strands to visual research in the social sciences. The first includes the creation of images by the researcher to document aspects of social experience and encourage responses from research participants and the second involves the production of images by the participants themselves. The second strand is more relevant to this particular study. Banks (2008: 7) noted that in this strand the subjects have a more 'social and personal connection' with the images. He typified this type of visual research as the sociological study of images and related this to film and

communication studies. He also noted that these images can be used by researchers to invoke comments, memory and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview. He suggested that visual images can smooth the path of the interview and both interviewee and interviewer can turn to these images as a kind of neutral third party. In his view, this can relieve some of the awkwardness of a situation where there are significant status differences between participants and researchers.

Gauntlett (2007) drew from a similar visual and creative tradition. He developed the notion of participants preparing for an interview and bringing along a completed task of some sort; for example he described studies in which individuals were asked to make visual objects then interpret them. The particular focus of Gauntlett's own research was building metaphorical models of identity using Lego. This was seen as an alternative to more traditional interviewing techniques with a focus on accessing experience through language. The aim in Gauntlett's work was to access deep information that participants had perhaps previously not considered in any detail. Gauntlett referred to Giddens (1991) and discussed the notion of an individual's narrative of the self to explain journeys through the social world. Gauntlett concluded with some assertions about the significance of the types of creative methodologies he advocated. Primarily, he argued that these methodologies offered a powerful alternative approach which can provide the opportunity for participants to communicate a different kind of information. He also argued that giving participants time to reflect during the process of making something gives the opportunity to consider what is important before speech is required. These were useful points which have supported the thinking behind my own study.

Elicitation devices can also be linked to theories about material culture (Miller 1987). Miller's work can be characterised as an analysis of the social use of things and how people construct personal identity from the goods and services they receive. Pahl (2005: 340) drew on this notion of links between identity and objects and argued that researchers can use artefacts or material objects to evoke narratives. She termed her approach 'an ethnography of communicative practices' and suggested that artefacts open up peoples' worlds. In a further study Pahl and Rowsell (2010) proposed that texts are also artefacts which link

to the identity of the creator. This idea was taken further by Hodder (1994) who suggested that any artefacts can act as evidence and provide material traces that support qualitative research although he stressed the importance, where possible, of dialogue and critical commentary from participants. Bartlett (2007) also examined the importance of artefacts in literacy practices and suggested that artefacts can support students in feeling literate.

I introduced the idea of bringing objects to the first interview in discussion with students at our preliminary meeting. Visual images for the next interview were discussed at the preceding interview with reminder emails sent before the session. This gave participants a chance to consider beforehand what they would be prepared to share, which is important for ethical reasons, but also gave some reflection time. In addition, I think it created the possibility of another type of relationship with me as a researcher rather than as a tutor. The visual objects helped to create a situation in which personal and social aspects of practice could be divulged. The participants treated this seriously and talked about how gathering the objects or images had helped focus their mind on the holistic ideas of academic literacies.

In this study, I used a range of 'elicitation devices' as explained above linked to the kind of creative and visual methods described by Gauntlett (2007) and Banks (2008). I focused on three devices with the aim of accessing the socio-cultural context in which students' academic literacies took place.

### **5.6 Participant diaries**

Participants were asked to complete two short diary entries after the first phase of interviews. The purpose of these was to capture perceptions about academic literacies at the actual point of writing and handing in assignments. All five participants had some assignment deadlines before the Christmas holidays and others after the break. The diary entries gave further access to emotional states and provided further information which would enable me to cross check the authenticity of my interpretations.

### **5.7 Researcher reflective log**

Silverman (2005) discussed the importance of keeping a reflective diary. I wrote reflective comments before and after interviews with a focus on the role of

researcher and how this role played out during interviews. I drew on the notion that by developing self-awareness I could attempt to avoid 'positioning' others in particular ways (Burr 2003). For example, as Burr suggested, in situations such as a research interview, the participants' understanding of the kind of interaction represented affects subject positioning and the positions that are perceived as being available. I reflected on my own positioning and whether it was appropriate to see myself as neutral researcher or co-constructor of meaning (explained in more detail in the section on a social constructionist approach in the previous chapter). Fine (1994) also influenced my reflections. In *Working the Hyphens*, she alerted researchers to dangers inherent in social research studies. In particular, she highlighted the danger of a discourse of the 'other'. By this she means researchers' tendency to hide their own role under a guise of neutrality which can create an 'othering' of research participants. She noted participants in research studies were often those with less powerful positions than the researcher. She emphasised the importance of critically locating the self in the research process and continuing to reflexively review assumptions and beliefs.

Indeed, I was careful to bear this in mind as I wrote reflective accounts using a prompt sheet (see appendix 9.2) to remind me to note key issues. In particular, I noted objects and images brought to the interviews, main themes and issues and speculations about the data. I noted *how* the participants spoke about issues, interpersonal aspects, (for example laughter and anxiety) and whether anything was said after the tape was turned off as well as continuing to reflect on how my presence, interruptions and questions influenced the study.

In addition, I continued to write reflective points during the process of analysis and literature review reflecting on whether early interpretations made sense and had what Altheide and Johnson (1994:485) call 'interpretive validity'. This involves an appreciation that interpretation takes place during all stages of research. Interpretive validity is about creating plausible, credible and trustworthy research and being aware that personal views and perspectives are likely to affect both the research approach and its interpretation. According to Johnson (1997), a key strategy to understand and acknowledge this kind of subjectivity is reflexivity or critical self-reflection. In this study, this involved

explicit consideration of how interpretations were generated and how my positionality affected these interpretations.

## 5.8 Ethical considerations

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) noted that ethical considerations are related intrinsically to morality and that research studies should consider questions such as the value of the knowledge produced and the social contributions made. In addition, Silverman (2006) argued that values and ethics are fundamental aspects of research activities and poorly thought out ethical strategies can lead to significant infringement of subjects' rights. For example, if the research was conducted in a way that distressed or disadvantaged participants the validity of the findings would be called into question. Cohen et al (2000) summarised key ethical principles including the following: 'beneficence'; informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity. Beneficence is the notion of 'doing good' and ensuring 'no harm' ensues. Informed consent includes giving appropriate information enabling participants to make a decision about participation, ensuring the information is understood and making sure participation is voluntary. This includes written consent and if necessary gaining consent by proxy (Silverman 2006). For example, participants may be asked whether the findings can be published and consent forms may also give the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality means that researchers undertake that outcomes are only disseminated in approved circumstances. Anonymity ensures that the identity of the participants is not revealed to protect them from inconvenience, embarrassment or harm during the study or at any point in the future.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) noted that ethical issues can arise at any time in the research process. For example, informed consent at the start of the project works on the principle that participants have a full understanding of the research aims although in reality the researcher may not provide evidence that this is the case. As the study progresses many aspects of research ethics may be problematic. In particular, the role of the researcher can involve tensions between professional distance and personal relationships and unequal power relationships.

In this particular study, I did consider the underlying principles of ethical considerations noted above and ethical approval was granted by the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee. To ensure 'beneficence' students were reassured that participation or withdrawal would not have a positive or negative effect on their studies. Students completed a consent form which reassured them about confidentiality and anonymity (see appendix 7.1). The topic was not an unduly sensitive one, although students did disclose information about themselves. I have ensured that the audio files were stored securely and participants have been renamed. In addition, I have continued to reflect on the possibility that unequal power relationships could have had a detrimental effect on the participants and have attempted to counter this. For example, although students were reassured that they could withdraw at any time they may have continued to participate despite some reluctance for fear of inconveniencing the researcher who they were aware was an academic tutor on the Education Studies award. I needed to remain sensitive to this possibility and keep the unequal power relationships in mind and not put undue pressure on students with reminders about meetings and requests for information.

I was also aware that there may have been some perceived advantage in taking part in the study. I was in a powerful position as a teacher and tutor within the Education Studies programme in particular teaching and tutoring on the English and Education Studies award. My original intention had been to avoid students on this award being involved in the study. I approached students from the other awards first but did not have enough volunteers. As a result there were three participants from English and Education Studies; one participant from Sociology and Education Studies and a further participant taking Education Studies, Psychology and Counselling.

I made sure that participants were aware that I took the notion of perceived advantage seriously. I discussed this when I went to talk to the groups before participants enrolled into the study. I made sure participants were aware that their assignments would be moderated by another tutor. No inducements for taking part were offered although I did discuss the value of being involved in a research project when these students would be devising and implementing their own study in their final year.

A further point that I reflected on as I undertook the study was that it was also helpful to have the level of trust a more personal relationship with some of the participants gave me. I was aware, however, that the fact that this only applied to three of the five participants could also have been a drawback.

Finally, my intention was to be open and honest with the participants, to treat them with respect and to emphasise the fact that I was taking on a role as researcher rather than as a tutor or lecturer in the interview situation.

### **5.9 Introduction to participants: Lucy, Hilary, Tony, Bella, Cathy**

Information about the five participants is presented below in the form of short pen portraits about each person. This information was gathered at the beginning of each of the first interviews.

Lucy is a female 20 year old Education Studies and Sociology student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the Midlands. She worked as a nanny before starting at university and has a part time job in a department store. She lives in student accommodation with her boyfriend. She did a National Diploma rather than 'A' levels. She has two sisters one who is older and one who is younger. The older sister is doing a Law degree.

Hilary is a female 19 year old English and Education Studies student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the North East. She works part time as a sales assistant and lives in student accommodation. She did A levels. She has one older brother and according to H. her parents are very supportive.

Tony is a male 22 year old English and Education Studies student in his second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. He started a Business degree which he didn't enjoy and then applied to change awards. His home town is in the South where his mother lives. His father lives in the North. He works part time in a restaurant and lives in student accommodation with four other students near the City centre. He did A levels and said that schooling didn't prepare him for independent learning. He has one older brother.

Bella is a female 19 year old Education Studies, Psychology and Counselling student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the South. She works part time in a restaurant and lives in student accommodation with four other students near the City centre. She did A levels and enjoyed her education. She has two younger sisters and according to B. her parents are 'well-educated'.

Cathy is a female 19 year old English and Education Studies student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the North. She works part time as a sales assistant and lives in student accommodation with seven other students near the City centre. She did A levels but did not enjoy her secondary schooling at a grammar school. She has one younger brother and is the first in her family to go to university.

### 5.10 Approach to Analysis

In this section, I discuss and clarify my approach to the analysis of data. Qualitative researchers, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), traditionally have not been explicit about analysis. Yet Silverman (2006) argued that transparency and rigour are exactly what is needed in order to gain credibility. Rigour implies an organised approach to sorting and handling the data although interpretation and some more imaginative and speculative approaches are also important (Gibbs 2007). The guiding principles for analysis and interpretation in this study drew on the points above. In summary, the aim was to use systematic scrutiny alongside thorough and reflexive methods. The intention was to create a convincing analysis while bearing in mind the subjective nature of the enterprise and the study's aims and theoretical positions. For example, as explored earlier, I did not see myself as 'neutral' but as an 'active' participant in interviews (Fontana and Frey 2000). From my perspective, the data were jointly constructed and yet I was also attempting to understand and take an insider view of others' experiences. I needed to reconcile the complexities of attempting to separate out my own contributions whilst acknowledging I was an inevitable part of these interactions. This ambiguity has been discussed in the



previous chapter. I took into account the phenomenological notion of 'bracketing' out (Schutz 1967) the researcher's subjective viewpoint whilst also acknowledging the notion of co-construction. Reflective notes helped me to consider some of these contradictions and to reflect on multiple layers of meaning. With these kinds of complexities in mind, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) advised that it is important not to see analysis as a distinct stage of research but as a cyclical process and a reflexive activity that informs all aspects of research activity.

Although, I started to focus more attention on analysis at the end of the data gathering process, I did follow Coffey and Atkinson's suggestion, and kept a reflective log throughout the study. This meant that I considered interpretation from the start as discussed above. In fact, by setting up the three-part structure of the interviews focused on the notions of material objects; spaces and places; and people and relationships, in a sense I had already created a provisional set of analytic categories. This is what Miles and Huberman (1994:58) call a 'start list'. I was also aware of the inherent contradictions of imposing this initial three phased structure in opposition to ideas about phenomenological bracketing and the notion of inductive analysis in grounded theory. In some ways this structure presupposed a way of categorising participants' experiences. However, I did not view these contradictions as a problem but as an example of drawing appropriately on a range of methodologies (the 'bricoleur' approach discussed earlier). The elements of the three phased structure provided a focus on socio-cultural perspectives related clearly to the aims of the study. Nevertheless, in the process of analysis, I needed to set these 'start list' aspects to one side and follow leads that were not preconceived but drew on the perspectives of the participants themselves.

As described earlier, the method of analysis I used drew on the traditions of grounded theory which included a focus on using students' narratives as units of analyses. For example, as part of the process of analysis the transcripts were examined and re-examined using coding and categorizing from a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2001; 2006). The standard procedures of coding recommended in this theory involve identifying themes which lead to categories and sub-categories. These themes are then re-checked, re-structured, linked, compared and cross-checked with each other using a

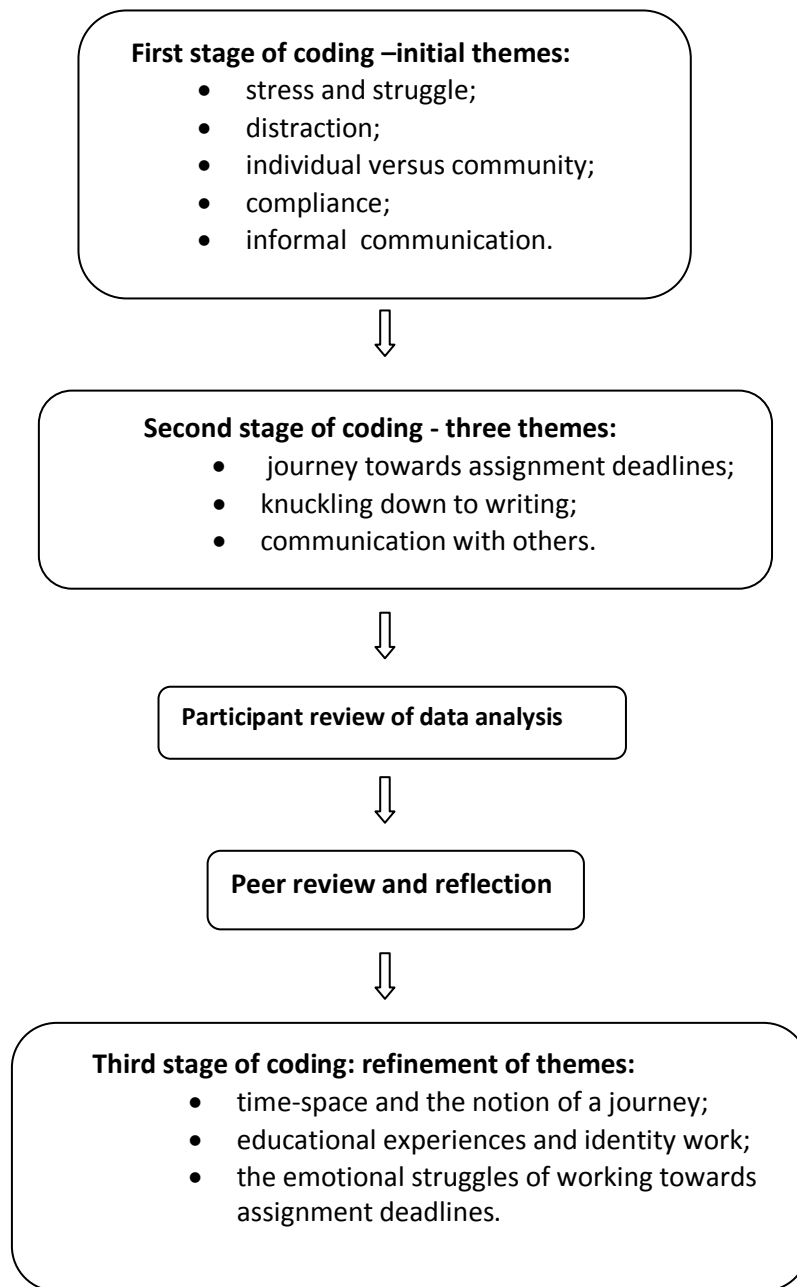
process of constant comparison. The purpose of these approaches is to attempt to avoid what Miles and Huberman (1994:264) call 'pitfalls': for example relying on the most articulate and insightful informant and making generalisations based upon non-representative events. Through the use of this grounded theory approach, I was able to break down data into themes.

In summary, the methods of analysis were based on guiding principles concerning explicit and transparent processes and I was influenced by constructivist grounded theory ideas (Charmaz 2006). The plan for three phases of interviews, drawing on a socio-cultural approach, was devised at the beginning of the study. In contrast, the approach to analysis evolved in response to emerging findings and concerns. There were several iterations of coding and stages of refinement but the main strategies are outlined below and will be discussed in the following sections:

- First stage of coding: initial themes
- Second stage of coding: three themes
- Participant review of data analysis
- Peer review and reflection
- Third stage of coding: refinement of themes

The diagram in Figure 2 charts these stages.

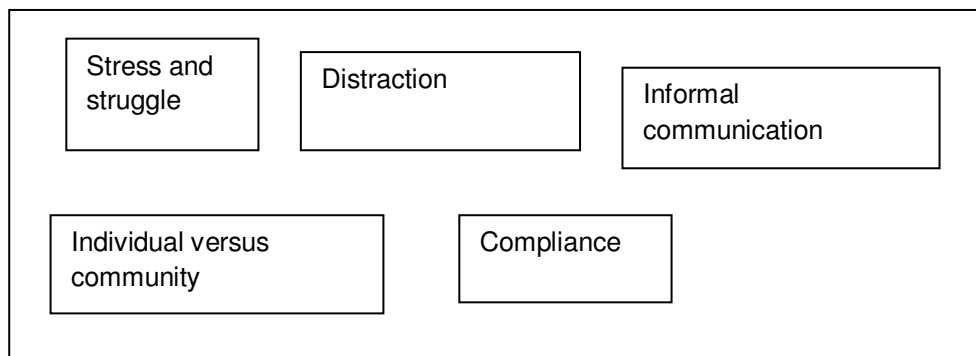
Figure 2: Stages of analysis



## 5.11 Process of analysis

### *First stage of coding: initial themes*

Initial analysis included a reflection on emergent ideas arising from the data itself. I was interested in how the participants construed events and their feelings about their academic literacies. As a result I labelled units of meaning across 'chunks' of text and considered objects and images that exemplified the same idea or theme (Gibbs 2007). My aim, as far as possible, was to avoid foregrounding my own interpretations and to focus on the meanings and interpretations that participants themselves appeared to be drawing on. For example, I noted when participants discussed aspects of 'stress and struggle' connected with academic literacies or when they mentioned difficulties with focus and distraction. The initial themes were summarised (see figure 3 below).



**Figure 3: Initial themes**

These first themes provided a useful initial focus. However, I considered that further refinement was needed to move beyond this descriptive coding. I continued to refine these themes by reflecting on how well they related to the data. I drew on extracts that seemed to exemplify the themes and I attempted definitions (see figure 4). Nonetheless these categories were problematic. The first two themes appeared clearer but others were difficult to define and data extracts often seemed to fit under more than one heading. I was not certain that

this categorisation was consistent or sufficiently authentic and considered that I needed to move onto a further level of analysis.

**Theme 1: Stress and struggle:** *'I get so stressed and upset .. I feel like an egg about to crack'* (Hilary: Diary entry)

- Notions of anxiety, struggle and stress related to studying

**Theme 2: Distraction:** *'I don't want to do it. I want to be out in the sunshine'* (Cathy 3<sup>rd</sup> interview).

- The notion of avoidance of a range of distractions and temptations.

**Theme 3: Informal communication:** *'That was the way that mainly we communicated – via Facebook'* (Lucy: 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview).

- Informal communication practices through the social media site Facebook and texting

**Theme 4: Individual focus versus the community:** *There's no way you can just go through a university degree without support from other people* (Bella 3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

- Individual approaches to studying versus a more communal and supportive (community-based) approach.

**Theme 5: Compliance:** *'I aim to write an essay that I would want to read myself... I would probably pick out to insert my own personality as such.'* (Tony: 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

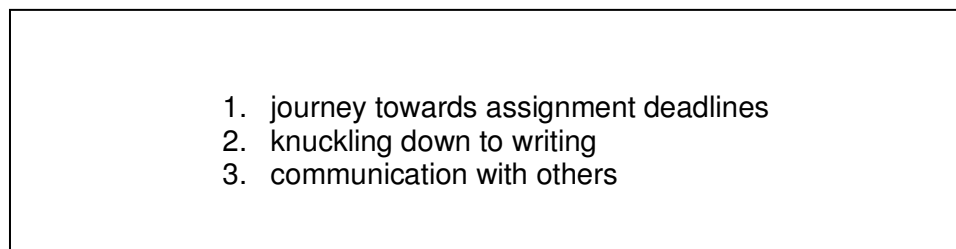
- Self-expression and a questioning attitude contrasted with concern to follow the rules and 'play the assessment game'.

**Figure 4: Initial themes with definitions**

### *Second stage of coding*

As I moved into what became the second stage of analysis, I began to think that I had assigned themes to the data which ignored some of the complexities and intersections of the social world. The categories were based mainly on description (Miles and Huberman 1994) drawing on actual phrasing used by

participants (see Figure 4) but I had not thought about more metaphorical meanings based on a greater level of inference or pattern making. In particular, I began to see that one way to interpret the data was through a metaphorical idea of journeying. For example, one student had trudged through the snow to hand in an assignment; another told the story of what she terms ‘throwing an all nighter’; a further student had dealt with a computer problem in which all her written work was lost. In each case, the stories could be seen as journeys towards the point of handing in completed assignments. Each story was nuanced by individual positions and identities but the uniting feature was a sense of moving towards an assignment deadline. Two further themes were also identified at this stage that seemed to encapsulate a more conceptual way of considering the data. The theme of ‘knuckling down to writing’ captured many points the participants seemed to be making. Many of the objects and visual images seemed to relate to this theme. The third theme ‘communication with others’ also seemed to imbue much of the discussion although my concern was that this theme was perhaps too closely related to the ‘relationship’ element of the third phase of interviews so was perhaps simply generated by the study design. The themes or categories arrived at the second stage of analysis are shown in figure 5.



**Figure 5: Three themes**

These themes became the focal point for a participant review which is described in more detail in the section below.

### *Participant review of data*

Ashworth (1993) noted that feedback from participants is a long-standing practice in qualitative research providing opportunities for participants to contribute to the findings. Indeed, my research design included the notion of considering participants’ views as a part of analysis. The aim was to draw on

participant perspectives and also consider whether this summary of analysis had resonance for them. However, there are critiques of this practice. Gibbs (2007), for example, identified the dilemma that can arise if participants disagree with analysis when the researcher thinks the analysis is well supported by evidence. Miles and Huberman (1994) pointed out that feedback efforts often run into difficulties as the participants are unfamiliar with the material or do not understand the language used. I attempted to reduce this kind of difficulty by asking participants to respond to some questions first in writing and then through discussion with other participants. I asked the following kinds of questions about each theme:

If academic literacies are 'journeys towards assignment deadlines' what is it like for you? Can you give some examples of what happens? How do you feel? Why does it happen? Where? Who with?

It was possible to judge how resonant the three themes (see figure 5) seemed to be for the participants by the ease with which they wrote or spoke about them. Certainly, they did generally accept these themes and wrote fluently about them. However, they also noted that the two themes 'journey towards assignment deadlines' and 'knuckling down to writing' were very similar to each other. In addition, I needed to take into account that they had only just encountered the categories whilst I had been mulling over these points for a significant time. I was also aware that I needed to consider the effect of the power relationship between students and tutor and the age difference that was likely to mean that students accepted my view without critique (Ashworth 1993).

As analysis progressed I continued to review the data and consider the three categories. I began to see that the notion of a 'journey towards assignment deadlines' seemed inextricably linked with time and space considerations. Indeed, both the visual and oral data gave insights into the temporal and spatial contexts of participants' literacy lives. These included: historical literacy contexts; current academic literacy practices; spatial contexts and communicative contexts. All of these aspects linked to time-space considerations. Also, drawing on the participant review, I began to see that although journeying appeared to be a credible and convincing theme there were

problems with the second theme: 'knuckling down to work'. The participants had noted that this theme seemed to be a sub-set of the 'journey' theme rather than a category in its own right. This second theme therefore could be removed. In addition, the third theme 'communication with others' seemed to link too closely to the focus of the interviews since it was one of the initial broad aspects of the research design (see figure 2). This did not seem to be appropriate as it could be argued this theme had been set in advance as part of the interview structure. As a result I realised that I needed to revise the themes from the second stage of coding and turned to peers for support.

### *Peer review and reflection*

The peer review was noted in the table providing a *Summary of Research Design* at the beginning of this chapter (see figure 2) and consisted of three meetings held during different stages in the analysis of data. Interested colleagues from an educational research group related to language and literacy met with me to discuss this study. The debate helped me to clarify that the three themes arrived at in stage 2 needed revisions. I found that the second and third themes applied to one participant more than the others and did not apply across the data set. Indeed, as I reviewed the data again and considered the classification of the data, I became increasingly aware that the categories had to change. At the peer review session we discussed other cogent themes drawing on some earlier coding. For example 'stress and struggle' translated into 'the emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines'. The final themes became:

- Time-space and the notion of a journey
- Academic literacy experiences and identity work
- The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines

As a result of these discussions I drew up a matrix (see figure 6).



Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines

**Figure 6: Matrix**

I completed this for each participant (see completed examples in appendices 9.7-9.11). In this matrix time-space and journeying became one theme. Discussion and reflection led me to highlight two further significant themes: 'identity work' and 'emotional struggles'. Extracts from the data seemed to have resonance with these revised headings. In addition these themes worked across the data set and were relevant to each participant. However, I was aware that the participant review had been carried out at an earlier stage of the analysis and only one of these new themes had been discussed by participants. This was a drawback of the analysis strategy as the participants had now left the university and were not easily contactable. Peer review could be seen as a partial substitute for participant review. However, it would have been preferable to review these revised themes with both groups.

#### *Third stage of coding:*

The third stage of analysis involved further immersion in the data and reflection as to why the new themes were significant. I continued to draw on examples from the data to complete the matrix for each participant (see figure 6). This allowed me to compare similar extracts across the data to evaluate and consider what the themes offered

As I selected examples for the matrix I asked myself questions not only about *what* was expressed (or the themes represented) but also on *how* ideas were expressed (the linguistic features). For example, I focused on the participants'

use of vocabulary and their repetition of particular phrases. Indeed, use of language became a particular focus at this third stage. I noted particular emphases and repetition, metaphorical language and vocabulary choice (see 9.7-9.11).

After selecting particular extracts I was aware of the danger of closing down the analysis. Although there does always need to be a point when themes are established it is also important to keep reflective awareness of other possible interpretations. I ensured that I continued to reflect on choices made whilst remaining aware of the researcher's role and voice in the construction of meaning.

One particular way I selected aspects of the data was by scanning the transcripts for particular references. An example is the list of words and phrases relating academic literacy practices to a journey. This list can be found at the beginning of Chapter 6.

### **5.12 Chapter summary**

This chapter focused on the research design outlining the methods used including the rationale for the selection of participants, the structure of the interviews, participant diary entries and the researcher reflective commentaries. In addition, the chapter has provided a justification and description of methods used for data analysis drawing on the study's philosophical assumptions and context. I have explained how principles of grounded theory and reflexivity have informed my approach to analysis. I have outlined three stages of analysis and three final themes. The following chapter describes and summarises these three themes which comprise the findings of the study.

## 6. Academic Literacies entwined in everyday life

At the start; having a goal; on the way; taking things with you; being half way through; pressing on; step by step; progressing through; being on track; learning as I am going; plodding on; moving on; scurrying through; blitzing through; drifting; lagging behind; hitting a block; hitting a brick wall; being stuck; having mountains of paper in front of you; detours on the way; pushing past obstacles; going back; looking back; being pushed; people being on my back; being guided by someone on the way; deadline approaching; getting there in the end.

The phrases above are quotations used by the participants during interviews throughout the data to describe their academic literacy practices. They will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter but are highlighted here to demonstrate some of the insights provided into the complexity of academic literacies and how these literacies are embedded in everyday life. The data provided insights into past experiences and future ambitions as well as the current and sometimes pressing concerns and experiences of the participants.

In this chapter I explore three themes that emerged from the data. The three themes are as follows:

- Time-space and the notion of a journey
- Academic literacy experiences and identity work
- The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines

In Chapter 7 I provide a more detailed discussion and analysis of how these themes illuminate the student experience and relate to the aims and objectives of the study.

### 6.1 Time-space and the notion of a journey

The lived experience of the interviews and the objects and images brought to the interviews suggested that, for these students, the notion of academic literacies as a journey was a significant one. I explore different ways in which they drew on the metaphor of the journey as they told their stories, and also draw on Bakhtin (1981) to foreground this notion of journey. As Bella, noted during the participant review academic literacies are like:

a journey to understanding...because when you do a journey you start somewhere and end up somewhere completely different. I think that sums it up really. You start and you've got less knowledge and less experience and then by the time you finish a journey you've encountered a lot of things on the way and you've kind of grown as a person or you know more and you're more experienced. So yeah, I think it's a good comparison to make.

Certainly, the significance of journeying is demonstrated by the list at the beginning of this chapter. This list includes phrases related to journeying used by participants as they describe their academic literacy practices. Phrases such as 'having a goal', 'pressing on', 'hitting a brick wall', 'detours on the way', 'pushing past obstacles' and 'getting there in the end' all suggested this notion of journeying. Journeys typically include starting and finishing points, movement through time and space, encounters on the way and a sense of personal development by the end of the journey as described by the participants.

In what follows I consider how journeying and the relationship between time and space played out for each of the participants.

### *Hilary*

In common with the other participants, Hilary was in her second year of a full time undergraduate degree (see section 5.9). Her accounts were vivid and dramatic, drawing on details of time and space to establish authenticity. For example, in the first interview Hilary gave an account of what she calls 'pulling an all nighter' as she approached an assignment deadline. Hilary used emphatic language devices suggesting that this was one of a 'stock of ready narratives' (Harden 2008:211) that she had used on more than one occasion. Devices included the repetition of 'checking and re-checking' and the insistent 'I just wasn't happy' to communicate intensity. In this narrative, the past event became something beyond normal routines that wouldn't 'work right'. Normal time was suspended as Hilary worked during what should be sleep time:

I have stayed up till 3 o'clock in the morning the night before checking and re-checking and doing references and things like that on one particular essay that I just couldn't work right ... Well, I re-read it and I couldn't seem to get it right, so I did stay up in the library till about 3am re-writing a significant part of the essay because I just wasn't happy,

In the second interview Hilary returned to this theme:

I pulled an all-nighter – so pretty much from about 10 o'clock at night till about 4 am. It's level 5 of the library and it's just directly looking out over the information point. But fairly late at night, so it's really quite late ... It's very quiet and there's just a glass panel in front so I can see what's going on, but I'm also secluded by the book shelves and it's just a single desk and just quite far away with only my laptop.

Hilary vividly described a specific location in a quiet corner of the library in the early hours of the morning. In particular, her use of the phrase 'all-nighter' was a powerful one. Usual time-space dimensions were turned on their head. An 'all-nighter' broke with the routines in which people work during the day and have leisure time, rest and sleep during the evening and night. The notion highlighted the importance of time. This wasn't just one of many typical rhythmically patterned, features of academic life such as turning up to seminars, attending tutorials, completing assignments and other activities associated with the course and timetabled by the institution. It stood outside 'normal' sequences, disrupting expectations and causing a wry smile to be exchanged between myself as researcher (and tutor) and Hilary. Indeed, there was a kind of shared awareness that tutors were likely to disapprove of such last minute writing and yet tacitly shared the knowledge that many students wrote assignments when time pressures have built up just before assignment deadlines. This event, set aside from the usual temporal and spatial patterns was particularly salient for Hilary. As we shall see, her narrative has features of the Bakhtinian heroic journey such as the particular significance of time-space dimensions, overcoming obstacles, carrying miraculous objects and a sense of moving towards a final destination or goal. Hilary created the sense of a special environment by emphasising the secluded corner of the library and the fact that she felt 'just quite far away'.

In this example, Hilary had 'only her laptop' with her. The sentence implies a further phrase – 'only my laptop "for company" '. The idea of a companion suggested that the object was accorded a quasi-human status as a companion on the journey. This also relates to the notion of the heroic journey in which the literary hero carries miraculous objects which will support his quest. Bakhtin (1981) discussed the heroes of chivalric romance such as Lancelot or Parzival in which the hero moved from country to country with miraculous objects. These objects enabled the hero to overcome some of the barriers and hurdles of the journey. As a result of these objects the destination was reached and the goal

attained. Hilary's laptop was emphasised as her only companion in this secluded spot. The significance of her laptop is also stressed in the drawing she brought to the first interview representing one of the key objects of her academic literacies life (see figure 7).



Figure 7: Hilary's drawing of her laptop

Temporal and spatial dimensions provided the specifics of where and when this late night writing took place. We gain insight into the tension involved in working to a tight deadline. It would seem that Hilary intended to stress the special nature of this 'all-nighter' in her academic journey. However, 'pulling an all nighter' is a contemporary phrase recognised by the urban dictionary (2012) as a study or work session that goes on through the night suggesting that although an 'all nighter' may not happen too often it is also part of the fabric of student life. Hilary, in common with the other participants, explained that she had learned from these 'all nighter' experiences to manage time more effectively. However, leaving writing to the last minute was not an isolated incident. She also described another event using language associated with travelling. She noted how she was still writing on the actual day of a particular deadline and she 'hit a wall' and had 'lots of detours'. Throughout the interview data, Hilary regularly drew on the language of journeying to describe her academic literacy experiences.

The notion of journeying also highlighted the significance of time and space. Indeed, temporal and spatial considerations are foregrounded through a focus on travelling'. For example, in one narrative, Hilary painted a picture of an

event out of the normal time sequence in which she trudged through the snow to hand in an assignment. The focus on the temporal and spatial aspects of this narrative created a vivid sense of the here and now. This story was told with some relish and with dramatic pauses as if it had been often retold and embellished. (This episode is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.)

On another occasion she recalled studying prior to university and noted how her mother was a significant participant in her literacy practices. She created the idea, perhaps unconsciously, that her mother's involvement was routine and typical and this relates to the notion of the routinisation of life over long timescales.

At the beginning of the first interview she used a continuous past tense and she repeated the significant word 'always'. The treatment of time in her accounts does 'naturalise' her narrative. In other words it provides an authentic context that helps the listener/reader to view the narratives as valid and plausible (Allan 1994):

My parents have *always* been very supportive of how I am and my mum's *always* been the pusher ... my mum's been the one that's pushed me towards studying. She'd sit with me and go through past papers with me if I needed, which is probably what got me through my biology. Nagging at me and reading through my essays.

Hilary referred back to her earlier account in the third interview and noted how her mother's 'pushing' as she calls it has continued into the present creating a long timescale and sense of continuity:

Basically I think I've listed that my mum is the main pusher. She's the one that will ask to read over my work and if I'm not sure it's good enough I'll kind of shirk away from that and try and distract her with something, but she'll want to help and that has frustrated me sometimes ... Because at one point when I'd just come back home from university I'd just completed my first semester and I was doing really well in my work and she asked to see it as if, you know, I was in A Level again because she had to help me through A Level quite a lot. So I mean that was quite a difficult transition.

In this account, Hilary moved from generality, expressed through tenses suggesting continued actions, to a focus on a specific moment in which her academic journey had a very particular temporal and spatial context. This

relates to Compton-Lilly's (2008) study and her notion of three kinds of timescale including an ongoing scale which helps to make sense of current experiences. Hilary situated the story about her mother in time and space, in this case at her family home after her first semester. These details helped to make her narrative concrete. The interaction between her and her mother is made specific and yet it referred back to an earlier point in time when she was more dependent on her mother's help and support. Her mother had not quite tuned into the fact that her daughter's academic literacies journey had taken her beyond the need for this support!

There was also perhaps an underlying assumption from Hilary that aspiring parents supported their children academically particularly during schooling but needed to learn when this support was no longer necessary. Hilary used the word 'transition' implying a move from one context to another. Although she had been more dependent on her mother's help, this had altered as she moved from home to university. There are implicit references to the notion of journeying through this use of vocabulary.

The extracts discussed above made implicit reference to the notion of a journey through time and space. However, during the participant review, after the interviews had been completed, journeying was discussed explicitly and Hilary confirmed the resonance for her of the notion of a journey. She noted that as she journeyed towards assignment deadlines she felt initial fear, next there was a 'forgetting stage' then about two thirds of the way through she got more stressed, followed by a focus on the assignment deadline. This represented, 'a big thing on the calendar with a red mark round it thinking 'Oh God!'" Hilary described particular moments where time seemed to take on a different dimension. Clock time didn't seem to operate in the 'normal' way and the spatial contexts had a memorable quality, for example, the seclusion, the lateness and quiet of the library at night or the snow on the journey to hand in an assignment. These contextual details seemed to illustrate the distinctive nature of Hilary's struggle with the demands of academic literacies.

### *Lucy*

Lucy's stories are also related to time-space and the notion of a journey. Specifically, she focused on the significance of particular objects. She described



some of the items that she brought to the first interview as the ‘tools’ she used for reading (see figure 8). She emphasised the importance of the colourful pens and highlighters and noted that she cannot read academic texts without them:

I would never go and sit down with a piece of paper without a highlighter and pen. These are like my tools when I read. .. If I don’t [highlight] it’s almost like I don’t take it in.



Figure 8: Lucy's pens

The tools are a further example, like Hilary's laptop, of miraculous objects supporting the hero's quest. A miraculous object is like a talisman that offers a kind of 'magical' as well as practical support. In the extract below, Lucy described her use of pen, paper and highlighters as she completed an assignment. She noted that these 'tools' as she calls them are more important for her than for others; in fact they seem to take on metaphorical if not 'magical' significance through Lucy's emphasis on how much she relies on them:

I write a draft first and then type up and change later. I plan, I have to make notes. I always use a pen, paper and highlighter first. I know a lot of people just sit at the computer and they can type an essay... to me it takes a long time before which is the hard bit...and typing is the easy bit because I've done preparation before.

Lucy was also very aware of her studies as a trajectory towards an imagined future. In particular, she pictured herself as a teacher and perhaps viewed her studies as a transition period in her life between school and work. She brought a diagram to the third interview of how her relationships with others connected with her academic literacies (see figure 9). At the top of the picture she drew herself as a teacher in the imagined future. The teacher self has tightly curled hair unlike her current self as a student at the bottom of the picture. She drew herself standing by a whiteboard with 'ABC and 123' written on the board. She was presumably positioned in front of a class of children. The drawing is labelled 'ME IN ROLE OF TEACHER'. Lucy conceptualised her learning as a temporally extended process. She referred to struggles in the past and she projected forward to a time when she will become a teacher. In Burgess' words

there is 'interplay of different timescales' (Burgess 2010: 359). This scenario also created a sense of academic literacies as a journey towards a goal, in this case the journey from student towards the final goal of achieving qualified teacher status.

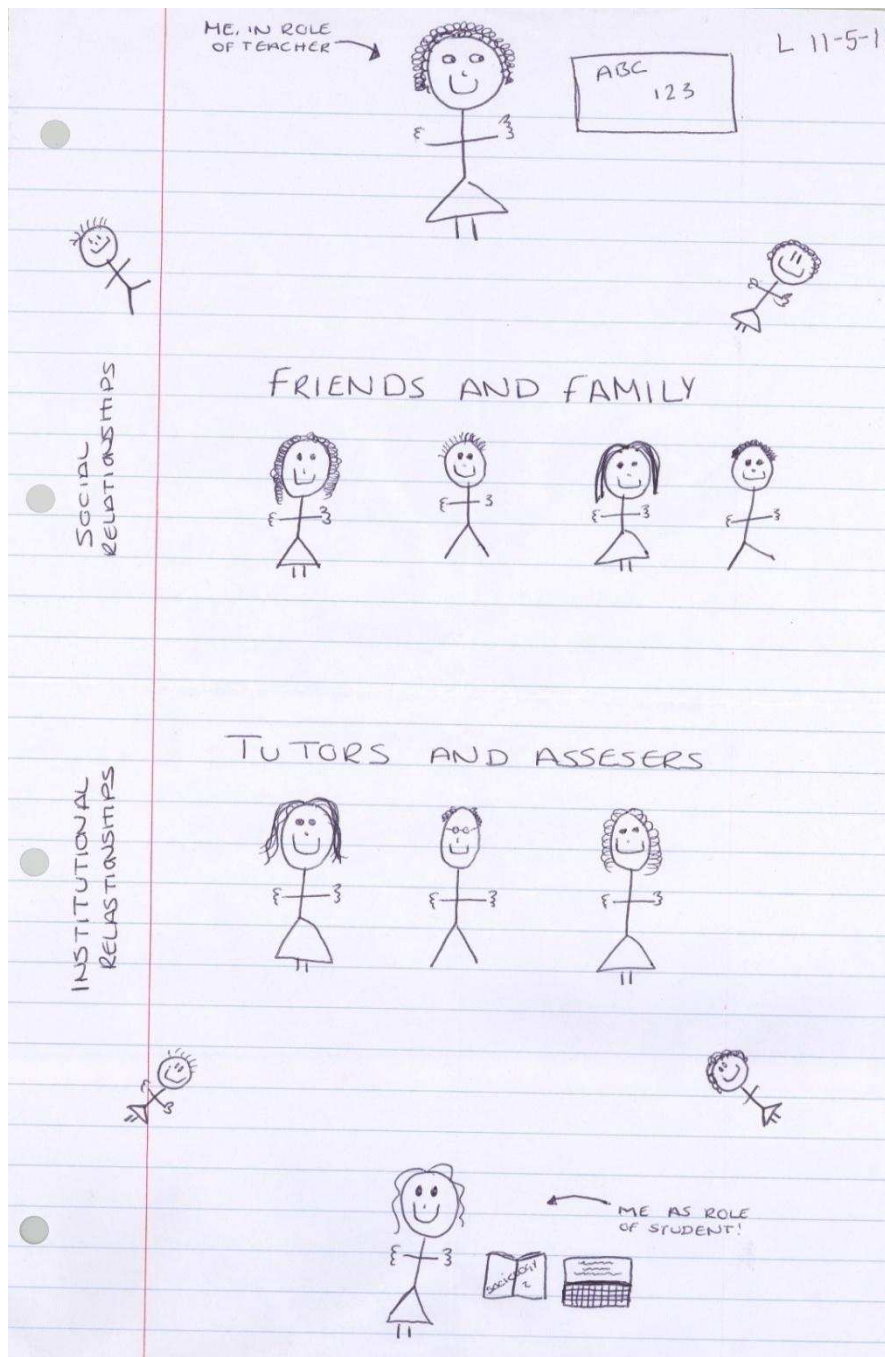


Figure 9: Lucy's relationships diagram

Her accounts had a sense that she saw herself as moving through time and space towards an imagined future with particular miraculous objects to support

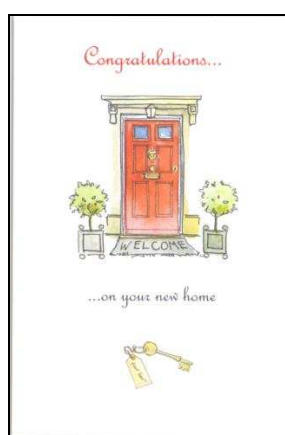
her. It could be argued that Lucy saw herself as being on a heroic quest towards the goal of becoming a teacher.

### *Bella*

In the first interview Bella discussed how she viewed assignments not just as a task but as something that can 'change me as a person.' She noted that she needed to be 'really .. interested in something to gain a positive experience from it.' In this first interview she brought an example of an exercise she had carried out recently in a seminar which she saw as beneficial and interesting and compared this to examples from her schooling where she was disengaged:

We read Shakespeare at school and I just absolutely couldn't stand it. I didn't like the language, I found the characters irritating and I had to do two years of it.

She juxtaposed past and present learning situations as she described a multi-layered journey. Even before the notion of journey had been introduced to her at the participant review, she described her university experience in terms of movement towards a goal reinforcing the significance of the journey theme. For example, she brought a moving house congratulations card to the second interview (see figure 10).



**Figure 10: Bella's moving house card**

She explained that this card represented programmes on TV in which people are advised about moving house. She liked watching these:

I was thinking earlier whether it's got a deeper meaning because they've got a goal and they're trying to get to this goal.

It is interesting that after Bella chose this object to bring to the interview, she thought again during the interview about what it represented for her. She seemed to have re-inscribed the object's significance. In particular, this comment suggested that journeys are goal-orientated or are like a quest. Her view was that academic literacies in higher education are a journey towards a goal with a specific path and direction of travel. Because Bella's aim was to become an English teacher, she found experiences on placement particularly significant in terms of this goal. For example, she described in the third interview how supportive tutors on placement in a secondary school were:

Like they've really helped me and supported me a lot. I guess just 'cos it's really nice when you're aiming for something to have people that are there and that are openly willing to help you and give you advice... it's just really I'm so glad I'm doing a course with placement as opposed to just academic work because it's nice, to have someone that's been through it and knows the ropes.

Bella linked her academic studies with her personal goal. In all three interviews she drew on the figurative language of journeying to describe her experiences. Specifically, she focused on a view of journeys as developmental and linear and leading to a particular life goal. She used the term 'develop' on many occasions and noted how she has changed in response to tutor feedback:

All my tutors said last year that I needed to read more literature and put more literature in and I've definitely taken that on board this year because I've had a lot more references to put in and I've just been more interested ... Whereas last year I was more inclined to give my opinion and not back it up with some other literature, this year I've really changed that and I've made sure that I don't make a statement without giving it some sort of back-up.

The phrase 'take on board' is an idiomatic expression which draws on imagery of travel although it is also used in situations when journeying is not a dominant theme. Objects or tools are taken 'on board' a ship or vehicle and the expression means to accept new ideas or theories (Chambers Dictionary 1998). In addition, Bella's narrative integrated references to both past and current experiences. Temporal considerations were highlighted and her accounts focused on transformative experiences that have shaped her as she journeys onwards. Bella linked journeying with development and searching for knowledge. For example, during the participant review she noted that academic reading and writing and assignment deadlines are like:

A journey to understanding .. At the start you're looking for anything that might help you, then you narrow it down a bit, some things are discarded and then you decide what you really want to take with you and what you want to involve.

The notion of a journey certainly had resonance for Bella and it is interesting that without any prompting she continued the metaphor by reflecting on the 'miraculous objects' that might help on her journey. These objects had been carefully thought about until only those that were most significant remained and all others had been discarded. She also emphasised the transformational nature of a journey. It is 'a journey to understanding'.

Additionally, in the participant check, Bella noted how she progressed 'through' an assignment but also how she tended to drift off and hit blocks and she criticised her own tendencies to lose concentration. She discussed feeling guilty and not being 'good enough' and wishing she had done something 'step by step' and started assignments earlier. Bella's use of language such as 'progress through', moving 'step by step' and hitting 'blocks' all relate to the notion of a journey through time and space.

### *Tony*

In his account, Tony also used language related to journeys. Indeed, he saw his studying as a personal journey. 'I'm interested in the course and it's a personal goal that I have to pass and do well in because it's something I'm enjoying.' He contrasted this attitude to a view of university study in which the aim was 'doing well, getting a job, earning your money and paying taxes.' He presented himself as very committed to personal learning. This was exemplified in particular by his emphasis on how encountering particular books has had a major influence on his learning. He discussed the journalistic novels of Hunter S. Thompson and in particular *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (2005) and brought his book along to the first interview (see figure 11). He described the influence of this picaresque semi-autobiographical novel and says he 'struck gold' when he came across it. This suggested a path of learning in which there were transformational moments as described by Bakhtin (1981:111) when these moments shaped the essence of the person. The book helped shape Tony's particular creative and free-flowing attitude to life and also represented his changing attitude to reading

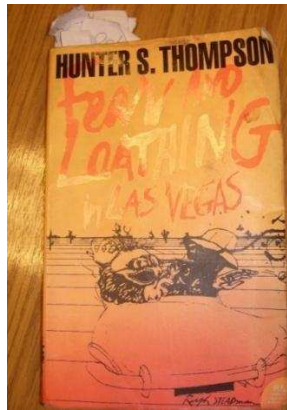


Figure 11: Tony's Hunter S Thompson novel

In contrast to this very positive experience, Tony described his path towards assignment completion in more negative terms. In interviews he used contrasting expressions. For example, he described his difficulties with being a slow reader and yet as a writer he rushed to complete assignments at the last minute.

I'm a slow reader .. not like my mum .. I plod on with reading and I'm very slow with a short attention span.

I scurry through with writing.. I do it all in one go .. scurrying around because I have left it all to the last minute.

It seemed contradictory but in these examples he framed 'plodding' or going slowly as a negative experience in reading yet 'scurrying' or moving quickly was framed as negative in writing tasks. However, both examples of language use focused on the notion of forward motion moving towards pre-determined endings established by the institution.

In the second interview he brought along a notice he pinned up above his desk in his bedroom (see figure 12).



Figure 12: Tony's notice

He stated that this reminder, 'gives him a kick up the bum' when 'he hits a brick wall' and stops him 'drifting.' The imagery seemed to relate to a journey in which he is moving on a defined path with a goal but straying from this path and encountering obstacles in his way. He noted 'how happy I will be when I've finished' and I must 'do work as quickly as possible.'

The expressions he used are related to a hero's epic adventures in overcoming obstacles whilst moving forward towards his goal. For example, in the participant review meeting he noted how he always ended up doing essays the night before the deadline using a can of Red Bull to keep him awake:

At the beginning I do all my research first and then just write the essay within one go ... [I] just blitz through it .....[but] get a bit daunted with the monstrous amount of work I've got in front of me.

Tony used the phrase 'blitz through it' implying a devastating attack and speed of movement. Completing the assignment was a 'trial' that he must accomplish with special objects to support him, for example the can of Red Bull. Ahead of him was the 'monstrous' challenge. The phrases suggested a trial and he noted the 'massive brick wall' and the 'mountains of paper' in front of him representing the obstacles in his path that he must surmount on his epic adventure or journey to assignment deadlines.

### *Cathy*

For Cathy, the library was an important place and it was the main location where she worked when assignment deadlines were imminent. The library helped her to be in a work mindset apart from distractions. In the second interview she described being there until three o'clock in the morning and said that on this occasion her 'boyfriend came with a sandwich at half past one'.

Yeah, last year there was one time where I was in till three in the morning getting one done, so... I wouldn't have been able to do that anywhere else. If I'd been in my flat, then it would have just been loud and I don't think the Student Union would be open till then. It's probably just the best place to do that.

Time and place were significant in this narrative and food was an important object on the journey needed for sustenance and support. The boyfriend who arrived late at night with a sandwich highlighted the importance of support systems. In addition, in the first interview, Cathy brought a drawing of a bar of



chocolate (see figure 13). She noted that this represented a reward for her efforts with academic literacies and she said that she thought to herself, 'I can treat myself because I've done some really good work today.'

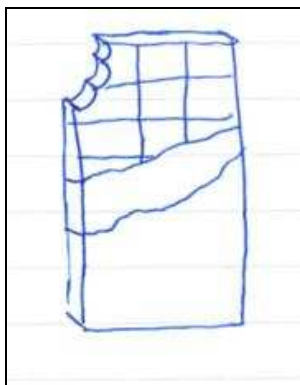


Figure 13: Cathy's drawing of a chocolate bar

When she was less pressured Cathy also worked in a shared space in her student accommodation. She described a scene where students who were all studying different subjects worked together:

There's two sofas sitting next to each other with the television, organised around the television... But there's seven of us, so there'll normally be... people doing graphic design, people doing event management and things like that, so it's all completely different. So there'll be one of us with a big sketch pad doing drawings and then other people with books and then most of us'll have our laptops there as well. I think there's probably an element of competition as well. Sort of if other people are sat there doing well, then you think "I'd better turn the television off and start doing something myself."

This description created the sense of a staging point in the journey. The particular arrangement of sofas around a television painted a picture of a very precise location. Important objects such as laptops, books and sketch pads were noted. There was also a sense of shared endeavour and even though the disciplines studied were different all the students were focused on activities relevant to their studies.

Cathy's accounts, in common with the other participants, focused on the broader details of her academic literacy practices. For example, she provided descriptions of working in the library late at night, eating a sandwich provided by her boyfriend or working alongside students on different courses in a shared living space. These incidents seemed to be the stuff of 'normal' university life. However, they were also about her academic literacy practices in context and in



particular how time and space were significant. These details gave us access to the pressurised conditions and the backdrop of people, places and objects that were part of everyday literacy lives.

During the participant review Cathy found the notion of an academic literacies journey resonant. For example, she noted four stages in her journey. She described a first stage when the assignment isn't important, a middle stage where she is starting to worry, a stage where pressure is building and she is in panic mode and an end stage. She noted that writing assignments kept beginning again and moving through the same phases. Cathy's story can also be linked to Labov's (1972) models of story structure cited by Riessman (2008). These included: *orientating information* (in the beginning); *conflict* (when pressure builds up); *climax* (when all her time is spent on the assignment); resolution (when the assignment is finally handed in) and *a coda* which comments on the story and often provides a moral. In this case the coda was the notion that the whole process will start again.

There's the beginning where it doesn't really take on huge importance and it's more about being back at university and going out with your friends and going home and visiting your friends at different universities and then that's the stage I'm getting to the end of now. And then it's like the middle stage where you start to worry and your classmates become more important and you're still going out with them, but you're talking about the assignment as well. And then pressure from my family builds when they're asking when my assignments are due in and, am I working on them and how far have I got and I start to spend more time alone focusing on my work .... Rather than going out I'd spend more time in my room reading. And then the next is a panic mode where you're not going out at all and everything is to do with your assignment. Even meals become planned around time spent in the library and your class mates become more like colleagues rather than friends. They're people you consult things about and you meet up to discuss the assignment rather than in a social sense and they become more of a support system as well for me and I can talk to them. Other things'll come into it, but you'll be mainly talking about the assignment. And then it's just when there's a few days until the assignment's due in, that's the end stage where you've last minute checks and you read through it all and make sure everything's as you want it to be and you couldn't have done better. And then the relief sets in. And it's like a cycle because then you start going out again because it's more of a celebration. So it all begins again and it's the same stages again.

The stages in Cathy's account were linked to time passing and in each stage different spatial locations came into play. For example, at the beginning, she

felt less constrained and could move location more frequently and focus on social matters. In the middle stage she spent more time alone in her room and the stage after that the focus was on 'not going out' except to the library and meeting others only to discuss assignments. Finally, she met the assignment deadlines but was aware that she would move through the same phases again.

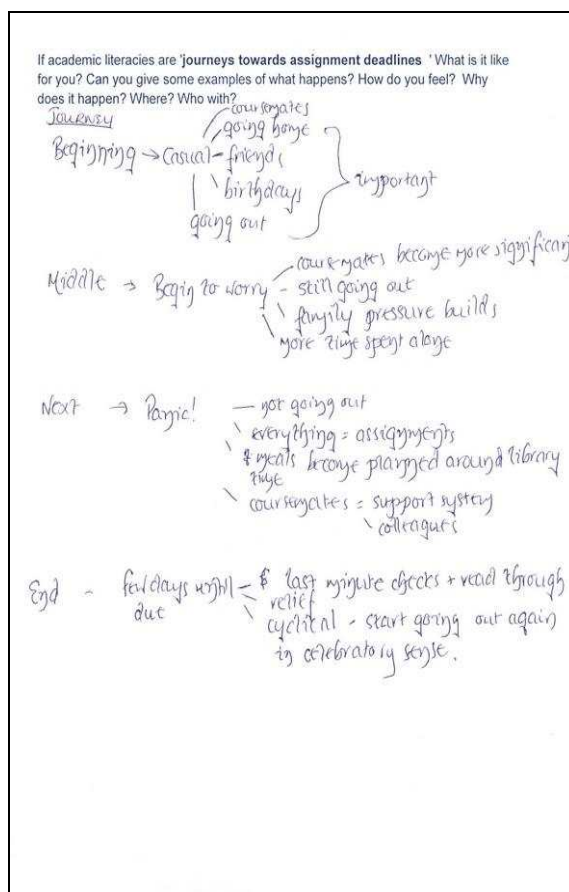


Figure 14: Cathy's notes written during the participant review

In the extract above Cathy was responding in the participant review to questions which focused her on journeys. In that context her use of the terms 'beginning, middle and end' are not surprising. However, her discussion suggested she sees the academic journey as a linear 'thing' moving forward in time. She described stages and significant events on the way, for example, the pressure from the enquiries her family made about her progress with assignments and the self-imposed structures of library visits and meal times. At some points she looked back, at other points she was guided or pushed along by others. She met with others but in the later stages of the journey only assignments were discussed. She made choices about avoiding distractions

and there was a sense of building towards a finale after which relief set in. However, she implied that each assessment period was one journey and as soon as this was finished another journey began. She also did realise that the journeys were multiple and multi-layered. As she noted herself: 'It's not a straightforward journey. There's lots of pitfalls and dead ends.'

The theme of journeying and its relationship to time and space has been highlighted in the extracts from the data discussed above. In these accounts students reveal the complex and individual struggles that lead to assignment completion, progress through study and career trajectory. As has been explained, their accounts frequently relate to the idea of a journey. In the next section I move on to discuss the second theme.

## **6.2 Academic literacy experiences and identity work**

In what follows I explore how identity work is threaded into academic literacy practices, and how it was enacted both in the interactions of the interviews and in the stories and anecdotes that the participants presented. I use the term 'identity work' to capture the ways in which the participants took part in a process of what Holland et al (1998) called 'authoring' self. The identity work consisted of sharing particular memories from their personal lives that related to academic literacies.

### *Hilary*

The significance of identity work was highlighted in the objects Hilary brought to the first interview. In particular, she brought an example of the kind of notebook that she used at school and which she continued to use for her university studies. The notebooks provided Hilary's link to her history and the influence her family continued to have on her studies. As Burgess (2010) explained, the past can appear to be entering the present through the use of particular objects. In interview, Hilary used the continuous past tense and created a sense of the warmth and idiosyncrasy of her family. The social action of student life merged into the routines of past family timescales. Her family expected her to focus on academic matters and constant reminders of the expectations of parents and grandparents were provided through the visual and material nature of the ageing notebooks with their old-fashioned style. There was interplay of different

timescales in Hilary's everyday use of the old notebooks and these marked Hilary's identities as located within her family practices.

Furthermore, because of her fluency, confidence and obvious enjoyment she seemed to be narrating a well-rehearsed story. She performed her identity through a humorous enactment in the interview:

Yeah. Well, the context of the notebook is that my grandparents, my mum's parents, have always given us books or stationery which they had from god knows how long ago. My mum's always maintained that since they have loads of this we don't need to buy new stationery ... I've always had slightly yellowing paper... [*laughter*]. My A Level teacher did always say that ... I didn't need to write my name on it because I was the only one that had sort of vaguely cream / yellow paper. [*laughter*]. But it's an Oxford style and it's quite sort of 70s and it's fairly old, but it does contain all my lecture notes and my readings and I have one of these for every subject...

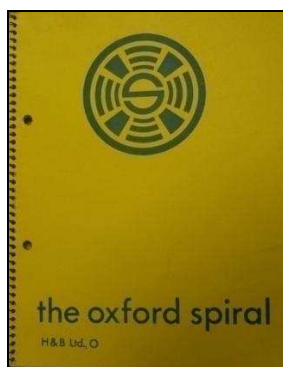


Figure 15: Hilary's old notebook

The notebooks provided a reminder of the voices from Hilary's past. Her parents and grandparents had an embodied presence in Hilary's everyday literacy practices through these books. They provided a kind of symbolic continuity in her academic literacies as they have moved with her into various phases of education. The notebooks also seemed to represent security and safety for Hilary. She explained the significance of physically holding them and commented that she 'panics' if she thinks she has lost one of them. She found it comforting to have something physical to hold onto. The notebooks represented aspects of Hilary's identities. Indeed, facets of her identities are sedimented (Rowse and Pahl 2007; Pahl 2007) or layered in the artefact itself and in the narrative she related.

In addition, Hilary presented two moments relevant to her student identity in the transition between school and university. She used the objects she brought to

the interview to talk about her identity and she discussed two influences on the decision to choose the particular course she was studying. She made the choice because her neighbour recommended education to her and also because of a particular comment at the University Open Day:

My next door neighbour said that I was really good with children and she said that I should look into education and that got me thinking and she said that the best place to do that was XXXXX because her sister had been here and it was one of the best courses.

Because I went to the open day and it all looked really scary but the English and Education Studies captivated me the most because I was doing A Level English literature... It just seemed really interesting because the first task was to make a children's book and my dad said I just 'lit up' at that point.

These two moments represented significant identity work and identity transitions when she can remember her thinking changing. She also presented herself in the interview situation as someone with the agency to consider options and make appropriate choices. These are moments which were important to her current and future identities. She reported the evaluation of her neighbour in order to present herself as having particular characteristics. The reported conversation is one moment in time, yet it referred back to the neighbour's past experience of Hilary 'being good with children' and projected into a possible future in which Hilary becomes involved in education through studying a particular degree course. Fluid movements across time and space were inferred in the first extract.

In the second example, she remembered how she made the decision to apply for her particular course as a result of one piece of information. Looking back to this moment she highlighted the importance of being enthusiastic about her choice. Hilary told her story and the retelling of these past events took on new salience. This contributed to her ongoing self- narrative as she took part in 'authoring' herself (Holland et al 1998:169). There was also a sense that she had crystallised and rehearsed these narratives over many retellings. Indeed, she made meaning from these particular incidents presenting herself as someone interested in education, good with children, enthusiastic about children's books and practical activities and particularly interested in a course combining these elements.

Throughout Hilary's data, the theme of identity supported a focus on significant aspects of Hilary's academic literacies. For example, she chose to highlight the influence of her family through the old notebook she brought to the first interview. The examples of the two moments which made her decide to choose her particular award provided an understanding of the construction and reconstruction of her identity over time. The complexities of identity performance suggest that the kinds of linear movements foregrounded in the previous section, are complemented by a recursive relationship between time and space.

### *Bella*

Bella also drew on her past literacy experience to do identity work. She considered her present and future hopes as she related her childhood experiences of being particularly fond of a certain book about an owl. She found this book the *Lazy Owl* when she was on a placement in a primary school:

I used to love it when I was maybe 5 or 6. I read it at school, primary school, and I did a placement in a primary school last year working with kids the same age that I was when I first read it and I was reading them a story. So I was going through their little box of books and I found it and I asked all the children "Do you know this book?" ..any of you read this book? And they said "No, I don't know it at all." So I read it to them and they absolutely loved it and it was really nice because all the books they read now I've just never heard of. So it was nice reading something from my early childhood to them and for them to like it as well. Also it was a bit weird. It was... not moving exactly, but it was just strange to be reading it to another generation of kids and it was really, really nice and it definitely meant a lot to me because it's nice to put myself back in that situation.

This episode enabled Bella to reflect on the complexity and fluidity of her various identities. She was able to re-author her current identity in relation to past experiences. She selected an incident to recount whilst performing a particular identity in the present. The story was narrated as Compton-Lilly (2008:15) puts it 'in the lived present of the ongoing interview', but in describing this event, time was experienced in a complex and non-linear way. Bella could identify with her previous 'child' identity; she could consider her future hopes to gain 'teacher' identity and she emphasised the recursive nature of her experiences as early memories were relived in the present.

In addition, Bella brought an object - a gold star - to the first interview which represented an important early experience in her childhood when she remembered being praised for the first time for a particular piece of writing. The gold star would seem to be a kind of symbol that helped her understand her current experience. This artefact was particularly helpful in enabling Bella to present the fluidity of her academic literacy identities:

The next thing is a gold star. When I was... I must have been about 7 or 8 and I did a story – I can't remember what it was called now – at school about some animals in the rain forest and these humans had come in to cut down the rain forest and kill the animals. So they all joined together – like all the tigers and [mice] and other creatures and whatever – and they all like protected the rain forest together and they all made a big ring round it or something like that, but erm... I never really used to be that good at English when I was younger. I found it a really big struggle with like writing, reading and basically I wrote that story and my teacher absolutely loved it and she gave me a gold star, my first one that year, and I was very proud of myself and I just remember [like]... Someone said [even sort of]... You know, what do they call it? Erm... feedback which is meant to be... You know, what was it – critical or something? I never responded well to that and having someone tell me that I was making [good development] really helped. [actually]... I respond much better to someone saying "You did this really well," than saying sort of "I didn't like that." If someone puts it in a... says it in a positive way, "I think it was good, but you could develop this," it helps me a lot more. But, that was a really big thing for me and I've still got it at home [in my bedroom]... Yeah, that was a really big step for me having a boost from the teacher.

**Alison:** Can you say any more about the gold star in relation to anything that's happening now with your academic literacy?

**Bella:** Well, [going back to my subject again]... After every session I write a reflective [journal] and you have to write it like your feelings to do with the lecture and the reading that we did and I really like doing that and my lecturer she comments on it and she always has something nice to say about it... and that's really nice to hear that someone respects my feelings and that I can say openly what I think and that someone's praising me for that. So I think that's really good because I find it quite hard to be really open about things and say what I feel. So being able to do that... it really is helpful to me and I think it's going to develop me quite a lot being able to talk about what I think. So yeah, that's a good thing and feedback in general – I've found my tutors have been really, really helpful because they always focus on the good things and say "Try and develop this further" and they concentrate less on the negative things, but they still manage to get everything across.



Figure 16: Bella's gold star

The gold star represented the significance of positive feedback to Bella and was related to her sense that her current tutors provided the kind of support that helped her development. Bella's view of herself as competent in academic literacy was located in past experiences and these previous experiences positioned her current identities. Hindsight was part of the process of identity work as in Compton-Lilly's (2008) study. There was also a sense that the story of the gold star was a particularly significant one and one that had been rehearsed and polished over more than one performance. Certainly, she chose to bring a representation of this event to the interview (see figure 16).

As in Brandt's (2001) study of the changing conditions of literacy learning in the lives of ordinary Americans, voices from the past influenced her current presentations of self and she expressed and authored her current identities in terms of these past experiences. Voicing this past experience and relating this to current experiences supported Bella in expressing what she needed as a learner. The notion of identity work helped to clarify Bella's agency in analysing her own needs and returning to a positive experience from the past to help develop her confidence with current academic literacies.

### *Lucy*

Lucy brought five objects to the first interview and it was interesting that she left an object that she presented as having a particular significance for her identity until the very last. 'I know when I was sorting my items out I thought "I'll do that one last." I don't know why'. The object was a sticker that had been provided by the university disabled student support service. The sticker was designed to be attached to assignments in order to make it clear that the student was dyslexic entitling them to particular support or consideration during marking.



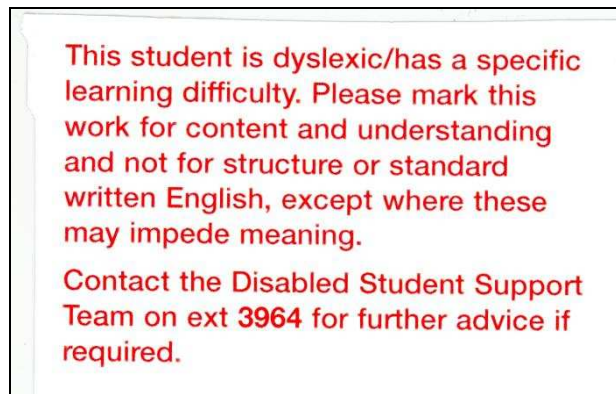


Figure 17: Lucy's dyslexia sticker

Lucy described herself as dyslexic and explained that she had very recently been, as she described it, 'diagnosed with dyslexia'. Prior to her university course this had been mentioned but then forgotten. During her first year of studying, Lucy noticed that she was getting comments about the way she was writing. As a result, she decided to, as she said, 'get it sorted out.' This can be seen as taking action and showing agency as it was her choice to take this forward. However, she also became involved in a process in which she acquired a label equating her with all other 'dyslexic' students rather than being seen as a unique individual. She described the process as lengthy and noted that the report conveyed the difficulties she faced in academic reading and writing. In this narrative Lucy's past was constructed in her present and different timescales interplayed as she described the significance of the sticker.

Difficulties with reading and writing had always been a feature of Lucy's past yet the 'diagnosis' was something that had only recently taken place yet would affect her future studies. This 'diagnosis' was an important part of Lucy's authoring of herself as she told the story in the interview situation. She was aware that dyslexia positioned her and the terminology had possible deficit connotations. In this next extract, the phrase 'lagging behind' was particularly resonant suggesting that Lucy presented herself as someone whose academic literacies contrasted with other students. Lucy commented:

It's [the dyslexia sticker] very significant because it's something I have always struggled with. ... I'm always the one that's lagging behind and I think that's because I have to read things more slowly and more carefully and I suppose that's as well why I use a highlighting pen.

The sticker had symbolic significance for Lucy representing both past and present struggles. She also questioned the use of the term 'disabled' saying she thought dyslexia was a learning difficulty not a disability and the word made her feel 'uncomfortable.' The dyslexia sticker reminded Lucy of particular events and spaces from her past experiences. She described, for example, going for extra reading support at primary school and having the same reading book for four weeks:

I remember thinking I just hated the book because I'd go home and I'd read the same book and I'd get stuck on the same word.

This linked to her current studies and as she terms it her 'struggles' with academic reading and writing. Her journey towards academic goals had particular challenges, for instance she said:

I do struggle to get my ideas down on paper because I find it almost intimidating looking at a blank piece of paper and then you've got to fill it with words, but your head is blank and you can't think what to fill it with.

Through the objects Lucy brought to the first interview she told her story recalling significant aspects of academic literacies and authoring and re-assessing past events and memories. Like Bella, Lucy's identities were not only self-assessed and presented, but also took into account others' views. Her current identity work related to her 'struggles' at school and her narrative shifted and blended past and present together. She also described the agentic way she moved beyond the dyslexia label drawing on particular tools such as the highlighter pens. Her strategy of slow and careful reading helped her to combat some of the difficulties she experienced. Although she did focus on the challenges she faced and compared herself unfavourably to others there was also a sense of her determination. Even if it did take her longer she would take her time and highlight text to support her understanding. These complex and shifting self assessments gave some insight into Lucy's own role in moving on from a negative sense of self arising from past experiences.

## Tony

Tony's identity came to the fore when he brought his great grandfather's note book to the first interview. The book was called *GAGS, SKETCHES AND CONEKTEDS*. This great grandfather was, according to Tony, a Scottish playwright who worked on the stage all his life. The book was said to be 'really old' and was passed onto Tony when his grandfather died. It contained the scripts of plays, jokes and songs in a musical comedy or pantomime style with choruses. Some of the text was in very neat joined handwriting and other sections were in equally neat capitals. Tony read out a short passage in the interview:

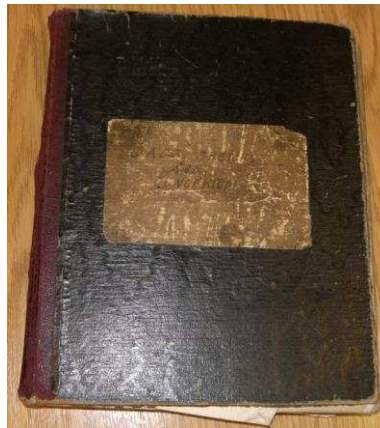


Figure 18: Tony's great-grandfather's book

**Alison:** Why is the book important to you?

**Tony:** Because I've always had a good interest in creative writing and all this stuff is, from what I can see, the heart and soul of sort of creativity and humour involved; and even though I only got this book recently, I've always liked reading it. It was always out at my grandma's house and I always liked having someone read out to me the gags and poems. Even though they're more olden days they are always good to hear.

**Alison:** Can you just read a tiny bit from it?

**Tony:** Yeah. It says Pantomime Old Mother Hubbard at the top and it's got "Open with chorus singing "We are the villagers bright and gay. We work in the fields and gather hay and whether at work or whether at play we are the villagers bright and gay." And then one of the villagers says "Look at the stranger coming this way. I wonder who he can be," and then boy "Good morning, everyone!" [Villagers] "Good morning, Sir!" Boy "Oh, Prince I am though in

disguise. He scours the world to find a lovely maid that I can call my bride. Does anyone here know of such a maid?" [*chuckling*].

The old book represented Tony's childhood interest in language. It provided, like Hilary's grandparents' notebooks, a link to his past and a projection into the future. It was a kind of intergenerational identity link through which Tony defined himself in terms of the humour and creativity associated with his great grandfather. Tony's interest in creative writing and reading continued from his great grandfather into the present. In fact, he analysed an extract from the book in a language assignment as part of his university studies. Indeed, the book helped him to construct and re-author his literacy identities over time. He remembered when he pored over the book as a child. He saw the book as representing his interest in creativity and it would seem that these encounters were moments of identity work.

In particular, Tony ended up withdrawing from a degree in business studies which he started before his current course. He suggested that the course did not fit with his sense of self. He described how studying a creative subject related to education (his current degree) did relate to his sense of who he was as a person. He noted that before he started his current studies he didn't find reading interesting and yet now, in his words, his 'attention has been captured' and he realised that 'academic reading can be fun'. The old book seemed to epitomise his literacy identity work in which creativity is emphasised. His literate identities were represented by this object which linked the past and the present.

Tony drew on this particular artefact to do his identity work. He presented himself as someone with a strong focus on creativity. Tony told the story of acting agentically and changing courses as he continued to create and recreate his narrative of self. There was a sense of fluidity as Tony discussed the significance of the book and its importance to him over time. Tony's histories and the practices of family members influenced Tony's own decisions about academic literacies and what he chose to study. The theme of identity is illustrated by Tony's sense of agency, and his presentation of himself as a creative person.

## Cathy

Identity work was also a significant theme in the data related to Cathy. In the first interview, she focused considerable attention on some of the dissatisfaction she experienced as a secondary school student. She explained how she had been told by a teacher that she would not do well in her A levels.

**Cathy:** I used to have to go every week to see my Head of Year because I used to be late quite a lot and things like that and if you got late more than 5 times you got detention. It was my fault for being late, but she just told me I wasn't going to do well basically.

**Alison:** Right, so you had to see the Head of Sixth Form for these sort of special one to ones.

**Cathy:** Yeah. [*chuckling*].

**Alison:** Right. What was your reaction to her saying that?

**Cathy:** I was annoyed that she'd said it because I'd never done anything that'd make her think otherwise. It didn't make me think "Right, I'm going to do really well now," but it [did] make me think "Oh well, that's all I am, a D. I'm going to get Ds." It just... I'm not sure. It didn't really like push me to achieve or anything, but I came out with a B, so I did alright.

Cathy returned to the theme of her sixth form schooling later in the first interview. Her comments revealed that she didn't enjoy her secondary schooling and thought her school was 'snobby' and the rules were overly 'rigid'. For example she said:

A lot of the children there were from a really rich background, but I couldn't afford to go on some school trips and I remember once one of the teachers saying like "Oh well, how much did your shoes cost?" and I was just like "Well, they're from the market," and it was just... It really embarrassed me things like that. They just weren't very nice at all. Everyone was quite snobby.

On one occasion she was expecting to get a good school report and was told she was 'really disorganised' and as a result of this comment was very upset. She noted that she was the first in her family to go into Higher Education:

It's always been a big thing that I'm the first person to go to university in our family and that's made me want to do it because then I'll be making people proud of me.

Cathy's comments about her school were heartfelt and at various stages in this first interview she appeared upset and expressed a sense of anger and injustice at some of the ways she was treated at school. She noted that her school was a

selective school whereas her brother had attended a comprehensive. She reported that his school was a more relaxed establishment which she thought would have suited her better. She considered that her schoolteachers treated her unfairly and implied that prejudice existed against her less advantaged home circumstances as in the extract above about the shoes. However, Cathy did emphasise that her selective school contributed to her academic literacies development and as she put it, it provided 'a step' on the journey that meant she ended up going onto university. At the end of the meeting she acknowledged that she had spoken about her feelings. She laughed and said that:

I was just thinking it feels like I've been in a therapy session! I've said things I wasn't expecting to say at all.

It would seem that she hadn't expected to share some of these more personal feelings. She told 'her story' in the interview situation and surprised herself by creating and recreating her narrative of self. Certainly, Cathy's school experiences appeared to be very important in her own identity work and self authoring (Holland et al 1998). The fact that she was the first in her family to attend university was significant. She conveyed a sense of pride that despite negative predictions she continued to achieve educational success.

Unlike other participants Cathy's identity performance made direct reference to wider issues and discourses associated with the social fabric of society. Her comments related to the significance of class and position in society. She thought the teachers looked down on her because her parents were not wealthy. She implied that her background was a working class one whilst the school served a largely middle class catchment area. These kinds of issues were highlighted in Barton et al's *Literacy, Lives and Learning* (2008). For example, in Barton's study formal structured learning was seen by adult learners as difficult and dangerous, involving identity conflicts and class barriers. Barton et al (2007) interpreted the notion of identities with a strong focus on socio-economic factors arguing that people are shaped by their past histories and class situation.

However, these kinds of identity and class conflicts were not a dominant theme in the data in this study. Cathy's narratives were the only ones where this kind of identity work was highlighted. Nevertheless, Cathy whilst aware of the influence of these negative events, continued to succeed in a higher education context. We can see her agentic actions and the complex movement between differing identity performance across time and in different contexts.

The theme of identity work has been highlighted in the data extracts discussed from all the five participants. Their narratives demonstrated their notions of self around academic literacies and provided an understanding of the construction and reconstruction of identity over time and insight into how participants continued to draw on earlier assessments of self in their current identity work.

### **6.3 The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines**

All the participants in the study discussed the stress or emotional struggle associated with academic literacy and assignment completion. The significance of emotional struggles for Hilary for example is summed up in a diary entry that simply reads:

I get so stressed and upset. I feel like an egg about to crack.

The significance of the theme of emotion emerged in the first set of interviews and was written about in reflective notes (see 9.3). This section provides examples from the data of the participants' emotional struggles. Hilary and Lucy emphasised this aspect of their lives more than the other three students. However, each person, particularly when they discussed assignment deadlines, focused on some sense of stress or struggle with their academic literacies.

#### *Lucy*

Lucy used the word 'struggle' frequently. In the first interview, she noted that she spent a lot of time sitting at her laptop, as she put it 'for hours struggling to get ideas on paper'. In her diary entries she mentioned her panic and stress. She used capitalisation and repetition to represent prosodic features for example:

STRESSSSSSSSEEEEDDDD.

She discussed her 'diagnosis' of dyslexia (see previous sections) and told the story of how she wrote an assignment emphasising what she termed, 'the struggle to get ideas down on paper'. In addition, she noted how she needed a lot of reassurance from tutors. In particular, she discussed her anxiety when she could not contact or email tutors in the run up to assignment deadlines which coincided with holiday periods. She said that it often felt to her as if: 'You've got the world on your shoulders'.

In the second interview she brought a picture which represented her need for quiet when she worked. This would also seem to link to her feelings of stress and struggle:

It's just a picture of a woman with a typical "Shhh!" finger on the lips, "Be quiet" type of thing. It's just representing that for me in [the library]— this is the sixth floor. That means the most because it is quiet and if I'm actually doing proper essay writing which I've got a deadline for and I'm feeling the pressure of it, I can't cope with background noise. I feel like I want to turn round and tell people to shush, especially when I'm reading, because if it's not quiet, whether I'm at home or anything, I find that I'm just reading words rather than taking it in. I've always been like that. I always like quiet when I'm doing things like that, but then if I'm only doing just looking at a few notes I don't mind a bit of background noise, but when it comes to actual work and I need to get down to it, then I do need quiet. I can't do either TV in the background, I can't... I don't know, my brain switches off and starts tuning into everything else around in the environment. So the quiet is very important.

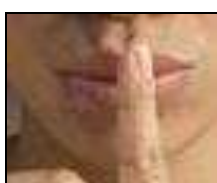


Figure 19: Lucy's picture of a finger on lips

Quiet had symbolic significance for Lucy. She used terms such as 'pressure' and not being able to 'cope'. She created a sense of intensity when she was doing what she called 'actual work'. She seemed to suggest that any other kind of studying apart from 'proper essay writing' did not count. The emphasis was on writing to a deadline and creating the right kind of quiet atmosphere to enable concentration. However, she found this difficult and needed to make sure she had the optimum conditions for this kind of pressurised work.



Lucy used the social media site Facebook for reassurance, collaboration and as a support structure particularly at stressful times. She communicated with a group of students on the same course about progress with written work. She asked 'How far have you got with that assignment? Have you mentioned so and so?' She 'chatted' on Facebook to two or three people at the same time and felt this was less of an inconvenience to people than using a telephone. While she was writing her assignments she had Facebook on 'in the background'. However, she turned it off, 'when I'm trying to crack on' and described it sometimes as 'a distraction'. In addition, she noted that the comments made on Facebook sometimes weren't useful as they meant she started to unnecessarily question her own work. 'Sometimes it's almost like you wish you'd never asked the question because you didn't want that response'. She also noted that Facebook 'conversations' tended to become much more frequent as deadlines loomed nearer:

I think you can always tell when it comes to near a deadline because people are more likely to be on line and I think you can always tell by the way they write like you can tell they've actually got the assignment in front of them.

In the second interview she brought along a visual image representing Facebook because she realised the significance of the interactions she was having around her academic literacies.



Figure 20: Lucy's Facebook logo

She explained that after the first interview she had become more conscious of 'how much work we actually did on Facebook.' She explained that in one particular case, Facebook had really helped support her and her friends as, in her view; no one really knew what this assignment was about:

And I know for example ...when I was writing about learning theories and learning styles and she was like ... “Am I doing the right thing?” And then I was like “Well have a look at this page, this link,” and she was able to say “Oh yeah, that’s a good point. You look at this one.” ... especially when you’ve got your work up there as well on that laptop and it’s ... almost like an extra resource, ... You always feel quite alone writing an essay, whereas if you’ve got somebody just to say “Oh, I’m this far in,” or “I’ve done this. I’ve looked at this,” it makes you think “Well then, let me just have a look at the criteria. Oh yeah, that’s a good point actually. That would fit in with this,” ... It’s almost like discussing your ideas before you’ve actually done it. So a lot of it went on before we’d actually done it. .... . So it’s much about what I would normally do in a seminar or over lunch ... that was the way that mainly we communicated – via Facebook, which I would never have really thought about.

In this interview, Lucy discussed the use of Facebook at some length and concluded that conversations on Facebook were more than just reassurance. She described Facebook as a collaborative social space in which she could discuss an assignment with three or four people. She began to realise that this was very supportive. However, she also found that if she was not careful Facebook became a distraction as she could end up chatting about social things rather than focusing on her academic work.

Discussion about the more difficult aspects of her studies formed a large part of Lucy’s narratives. She recounted how she struggled and the way she combated some of these issues. Ensuring she worked in silence wherever possible and setting up informal support networks were both examples of how she dealt with difficulties.

In a diary extract between the first and second interviews Hilary commented on how stressful she found assignment writing:

I get so stressed and upset I really just want to run away from it all and stop it right there....I can’t wait to see my friends again. I feel like I’ve been locked in some kind of social Siberia for the last couple of weeks only allowing myself, the ‘prisoner’ to be let out of half a day at a time.

Hilary used the highly charged image of ‘being locked in ‘social Siberia’ and being a ‘prisoner’ to create a sense of how stressful she found the build up to assignment deadlines. She suggested that normal life was put on hold during this period. She also suggested that she had an impulse to run away and yet knew she must treat herself as a ‘prisoner’ in order to succeed.

In addition, Hilary narrated a story about the struggle involved in handing in an assignment on time. The sensory and spatial context of the inclement weather was highlighted and this seemed to add to the sense of stress and struggle. In addition, there was a tacit focus on the lengths she had to go to meet, what might seem unreasonable institutional demands, which took no account of individual lives and circumstances. Hilary's use of the verb 'trekked' created a significant picture of the difficulty of this expedition. Repetition of 'really, really' and connectives such as 'and', 'but' and 'so' and details of specific clothing emphasised the intensity of the situation and the concern that the assignment deadline was looming:

At one point last year I'd done all my essays and I'd printed them off and it was snowing really, really heavily and I had to travel down in snow and there was a point where we couldn't get the car out, so I had to walk to the airport and get the metro to the Central Station and from Central Station to XXXX and I was in wellies, really big coat and everything, but I trekked to XXXX to hand these in and then came back. So it was quite intense handing it in.

Moreover, Hilary brought a particular object to the first interview which represented in her words 'bad food' eaten during assignment writing. The object was a 'Greggs' paper bag. 'Greggs' shops are a feature of most UK city and town centres. They tend to have extended opening hours and to provide 'fast food' such as pies, pasties, sandwiches and sausage rolls. Hilary's view was that when she ate this type of food, she was not looking after herself and this was a sign of stress.



Figure 21: Hilary's Greggs wrapper

**Hilary:** I'll start off with the Greggs wrapper ...And the fact that it's not terribly good food and I tend to associate that with doing my academic writing as I don't exactly have a lot of time to de-stress and make a lot of nice, healthy food. It tends to be "I'll go and get a Greggs," and that's not particularly healthy. When I'm up till 12

am in the library doing my work. I tend to forget about food, wander on the way home and find something just to eat and it's not terribly good for me. So that represents the bad food that I tend to eat.

**Alison:** Can you think of a particular time when that happened?

**Hilary:** Last year about late November, this sort of time of year. I was starting to panic a little bit because I was doing longer times in the library and it got really bad because I started gaining a ridiculous amount of weight because I wasn't eating properly and I wasn't sleeping properly because I was up late it then caused a lot of panic. My mum always tells me that I'm panicking too much.

**Alison:** And am I right in thinking that the Greggs pasty or whatever kind of food partly represents your emotional state of mind?

**Hilary:** Yeah in that I don't tend to take time out for myself and don't tend to look after myself too well when I'm doing my assignments because it tends to be focused entirely on panicking and getting the work [done] as much as I can.

**Alison:** Yeah. So you've used the word panic. Can you tell me a bit more?

**Hilary:** I don't tend to spread things out as much as I should. I know plenty of people that do it regularly, but that just never seems to work for me. I'm not one of those organised people. I tend to do things in a rush and tend to get a little bit anxious and a little bit scared about things. I eventually do them, but I'm more of a deadline person.

Hilary described in some detail, through the symbolic use of the 'fast food' wrapper, her emotional and physical state around the time of assignment deadlines. She also used particular vocabulary to emphasise her stress including words such as 'panic', 'anxious' and being 'scared'. She described how she did not look after herself properly during these times. She forgot that she needed proper food and rest and put herself under strain by ignoring everything but the looming deadline. Her Mum was concerned about her and she realised herself that she wasn't prioritising her health as she was putting on weight and not sleeping or eating properly. She knew she should, in her words, 'spread things out' but she couldn't manage to do that. There was a sense in her account that she would inevitably feel stressed by the pressures of assignment deadlines. University life and academic literacies seemed unavoidably to include struggle and pressure. However, there was also a sense of drama around her accounts. She presented herself as someone suffering

who could not always help herself even though she knew she could behave differently.

Hilary also discussed her use of Facebook as a way of alleviating some of the stress.

Well, I do tend to have breaks where I go to my friends and also typing on things like “Hi I can’t do this! Help! I need a bit of help with this,” ... If I’ve got a couple of friends on line they will sort of sit me down and say “Right, what do you need to do?” and sort of calm me down a bit and do things like that.

The use of informal structures as a source of support would seem to be significant and is related to the points that Hilary made in the previous section on identity work.

### *Tony*

Writing assignments was also seen by Tony as a struggle and he described himself as ‘a panic writer’ who tried to get work done so it was ‘out of the way.’ In the second interview, he described his main aim, in the face of assignment deadlines, as trying to get his work done ‘as quickly as possible’. He also said that he needed pressure and that he ‘gets away with’ leaving assignments to the very last minute and liked to get all the research done and then just do the essay in one go, usually overnight. He discussed writing: ‘in a deadly quiet room’ and noted that he worked to a: ‘pressured time-scale.’

So I’ve got to sit there in silence and just, no matter what’s going on around me, just try and block it out and just focus on the screen and write a bit of the essay ... Like I get all my books beforehand, anything that looks slightly relevant, scurry through trying to find chapters or pages that have key words in that I need and then just try and find quotes to fit into the essay and erm... yeah, just splurt out whatever I can really and by the end of it I’m so exhausted you can see the massive contrast between the beginning and the end.

Tony ‘splurts’ out his writing, and ‘scurries’ round to find resources. He created a vivid picture with these unusual verbs. His narrative suggested some degree of insouciance and fun but there was also an underlying sense of struggle. He did acknowledge that he needed pressure and this had its positive aspect:

Yeah, so I think the pressure drives me on personally to do it because it’s got to be in. So if you don’t do it you’ve missed out on your deadline and

you've got... well, that cross or red cross next to your name for not handing it in and no-one really wants that. So I think yeah, the pressure personally drives me on to do it to hand in the essay, but that's just how I leave it.

Indeed, in normal circumstances the pressure of completing assignments at the last minute did not cause him too much anxiety. However, he told the story of one particular occasion when he did feel a degree of panic:

I was sat in the sitting room and everyone had gone to bed. I was sat with my mum's laptop typing away and I remember about 6 o'clock in the morning I started having, yeah, sort of anxiety, panic. I hit a block, I didn't know what to write. I was struggling, scraping around the bottom of the barrel trying to find a point for my essay and I was actually getting really worried because I wanted to... It's not the fact I didn't think I was going to get it done. I was just annoyed because I wanted to get it handed in before I went home so I could forget about it, never look at it again and it's fine because I'd only have one... So after that I'd only have one more essay to worry about and get handed in. Yeah, I was starting to like... not sort of massively panic, but sort of get annoyed.

Tony recounted a recognisable situation of writer's block. He described 'scraping the barrel' and being unable to find something to write about. In particular, the fact that it was late at night and he was on his own made the situation more emotionally fraught. He did not want to emphasise the emotional struggle noting that he was just annoyed but was willing to acknowledge that he felt some degree of panic.

### *Bella*

Bella also emphasised struggle and stress in the first of her diary entries:

Feeling really stressed and panicky today - got 3 big deadlines, one tomorrow and two the day after. Pretty much finished all the work but just going over and checking it and worrying that it's not going to be good enough ... Also one of my deadlines is a presentation, and I get really nervous doing public speaking so as well as panicking about the standard of my presentation content I am also worrying about making mistakes when I'm speaking or getting embarrassed! Just want to get everything over and done with now really.

In the second diary entry she noted:

I think next semester I'm going to try and start all my assignments really early to avoid stress as much as I can!

Bella acknowledged to herself that there was inevitable pressure and therefore stress as a result of assignment deadlines. However, there was also a sense

through the comments that she made in the interviews that she dealt with this stress in a variety of ways drawing on her own resources and the support of others. For example:

Yeah and I always ring her (mother) if I get some sort of like mind block. If I'm writing and I just don't know what to write next I'll ring her and ask her what she thinks and she's normally really good with advice.

She also discussed contacting tutors when she was stuck:

Like I often email them just to check things over or... you know, ask questions and I thought that's what they were there for – if you needed any extra help you could ask them – but I've had some almost quite rude responses where they're like "I'm not here to tell you that," and, you know, "I thought I made this obvious," blah, blah, blah, this sort of thing and that can sometimes be really... I just think that's really out of order.... but then some tutors are really good and they'll be like "Do you want to come and meet me and I'll talk this through with you?" and... a lot of other people have said the same thing.

Bella was prepared to ask for support even if she did not always get the response she wanted. Although her diary entry written just before assignment deadlines did highlight a sense of pressure this was not emphasised as much in her accounts as it was by Lucy and Hilary.

Bella created support systems for herself by talking to her mum, sister and friends from home on Skype and by using the university Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard, for emailing tutors and making points on discussions boards. She also 'chatted' to friends on Facebook and communicated with course mates by texting and using Facebook. She tended to use Facebook chat to ask a quick question when she was writing an assignment:

I can talk to my friends off my course on Facebook. It's just quite a quick way of doing it really, if everyone's on-line at the same time and you can converse that way. And it's good for asking people if you're doing essays to just go on it quickly and say: "I don't really understand this bit. What sort of things have you wrote for it?" and... "How do you reference this?" "Do you know how to do this?" or whatever. So it's good.

She noted that: 'you notice it much more towards deadlines - everyone's on Facebook.' She pointed out that the key points people made are about lack of confidence, for example she noted that comments are along these lines: 'I can't do it! Blah, blah, blah!' She suggested that Facebook provided a space for

support and also for complaining. For example she noted that all her course mates were having 'a good moan' on Facebook.

**Bella:** You notice it much more like towards deadlines everyone's on Facebook, "I can't do it," blah, blah, blah and all this sort of stuff.

**Alison :** Can you give me an example of when that's happened?

**Bella:** Well, a couple of weeks ago if I went on my Facebook I'd see all my course mates saying "Can't wait to get this finished," "I'm struggling with the last 1000 words," all this sort of stuff and then people would be asking like "How much have you done?"... blah, blah, blah. "Have you included this or that," or whatever. So yeah, it's just a really interactive thing and everyone's on it. It's just a good place to moan as well and like to get it off your chest if you need a good moan to someone.

**Alison:** Does that help?

**Bella:** Yeah, definitely. It's just nice sometimes to just have a good rant; and no-one really cares, but it's just somewhere to write it. So that's probably one of the main places where people talk about uni work.

She said she liked 'multi-tasking' by which she meant communicating electronically whilst working. 'I'm really a home girl, so I like kind of having my family in contact when I'm doing my work; it makes me feel more at home'. She discussed how she drew on emotional support from parents for example she contacted her Mum when she had a 'mind block'. She made reference to some of her difficulties here but also made clear what systems she had in place for dealing with stressful situations.

### *Cathy*

Cathy like Bella did not concentrate on stress and struggle as much as Hilary and Lucy. However, in all three interviews Cathy referred in particular to 'distractions'. Her narratives were focused around trying to give enough attention to her studies. Particularly before deadlines she said to herself: 'Oh, I'm not going to get it done!' Above all, distractions were what created academic struggle for Cathy. She thought she should always be doing more work than she was actually doing. 'I should be getting on with stuff because I want to do well.' Yet she noted that she had a tendency to be her own worst enemy. Furthermore, she pointed out that:



It's always been a big thing that I'm the first person to go to university in our family and that's made me want to do it because then I'll be making people proud of me.

However, she stated that this was 'added pressure' because she was worried about not living up to her parents' expectations. She also suggested that other people seemed to manage their work load better than she did and therefore got less stressed.

Moreover, she was annoyed by her course-mates who were not always truthful about how much work they were doing or who appeared to do well without working hard:

People say they haven't started an assignment when they really have and come out with firsts ... Someone on my course never does any work but does really well.

We can recognise this kind of situation. Cathy perceived that her fellow students underplayed the efforts they put into their study. She implied that she has to earn her success but others either pretended they were not working hard when in reality this was not the case or they did not actually need to work very hard to do well. Either situation annoyed her as she struggled to concentrate and felt pressurised by her family.

In addition, she related a particularly stressful episode when she thought she had lost all of her work just before a deadline because of an IT error.

Yesterday I was doing my work, downloaded it from an email attachment and... then I saved it, but it doesn't save it to your domain when you do that. It saves it to a temporary file that gets deleted and so I had to... I wouldn't even have thought about it before, but I had to go and talk to the IT people and he got it back for me and if I hadn't, then I wouldn't have got it in on time because I'd have had to have done it all again. So he like saved my life that day. [*chuckling*]. So yeah, that was really helpful.

She noted that the technician 'saved her life'. She used exaggerated language here because this was potentially a very stressful situation. Although she had written an assignment, she would not have been able to hand it in and because of university regulations would not have been able to claim any extenuating circumstances. The IT technician enabled her to hand in the assignment on time so a potentially very stressful situation was averted.

In addition, like Hilary and Lucy, Cathy discussed how she interacted and collaborated on Facebook with course mates using the chat feature as a support system. In particular, she noted how she asked a course mate for advice about theory. Furthermore, she discussed how people moaned on Facebook during assessment times, 'Often people like will just complain, "Oh, I've got so much work to do," and that sort of thing. So it's kind of like a support system probably.'

Cathy did narrate stressful situations but she also considered how she alleviated stress by drawing on the support of others in various ways, for example, the formal university structures as well as the informal support she received on Facebook.

Stress was voiced by the participants during interviews and in some cases was part of an undercurrent expressed through body language and tone of voice. Researcher field notes included reflections on how a sense of emotional intensity was created during interviews particularly in the case of Hilary, Cathy and Lucy. For example, at the end of the first interview after the recorder was switched off I said to Hilary that I thought she had focused on the emotional aspects of academic literacies. She responded by saying that she surprised herself with the in-depth nature of her comments. She emphasised what had been said in the recorded interview about her tendency to panic and be easily distracted. I also wrote a reflective log entry about her strong focus on emotional aspects including her use of intonation and gesture to emphasise the strength of her feelings around what she termed 'stress' and 'struggle' (see appendix 9.4).

Cathy also made some interesting comments acknowledging that she hadn't expected to talk about emotional issues in the interview. Furthermore, in my reflective log I wrote comments after the interview about the intensity in her tone of voice when discussing the pressure she feels as the first person in her family to go on to higher education. In addition, Bella also focused strongly on feelings of struggle and stress emphasising how difficult she found certain aspects of academic literacies. I wrote notes about her body language, in particular, the fact that she held herself in a rigid and stiff posture particularly when discussing aspects of university life she found stressful. Lucy also used gestures to

emphasise the significance of her feelings sweeping her hands over the objects she had brought to the interview to emphasise their significance. In particular, she gestured repeatedly over the copy of her assignment guidelines she had brought to the first interview. She drew attention to these guidelines when discussing how alone she felt when completing assignments during holiday periods when tutors are not available to answer questions.

Stress and struggle were part of academic literacy experiences for each of the participants leading to anxiety and loss of confidence. This theme offered understanding of the intensity of academic literacy experiences, the significance of the support of others and how stress was alleviated including insight into the informal support structures of Facebook.

#### **6.4 Chapter summary**

These themes provide different perspectives on the participants' experience of academic literacies and the ways in which these are integrated into their lives. The first section considered examples relating to academic literacy as a journey through time and space. The second section included instances relevant to academic literacies and notions of self or identities. The third section explored the kind of emotional struggles related to academic literacy practice. Seen together they point to the complexity and diversity of students' experiences and offer insights into the trajectories of academic literacies in time and space, the construction and reconstruction of identity over time and understanding of the emotional struggles and intensity of experiences involved in these literacies. Indeed, the three themes all provide significant insights into the overlap between students' personal and their academic literacy experiences. More detailed analytical points are included in the following chapter.

## 7. Discussion

This chapter considers how the three themes examined in the previous chapter shed light on how students make sense of academic literacy practices and integrate these into their lives. The themes I identified in the data are as follows:

- time-space and the notion of a journey;
- academic literacy experiences and identity work;
- the emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines.

The insights provided by these three themes allowed an analysis and exploration of students' perspectives on academic literacies, the context in which these took place and the interrelationship between literacy practice and everyday life. I will conclude this chapter by summarising how the three themes have illuminated these students' experiences of academic literacies.

### 7.1 Exploring the journey theme.

The notion of journey relates both to ideas about temporal-spatial dimensions (Bakhtin 1981) and timescales (Lemke 2001). One type of journey encountered in literature is the heroic journey (Bakhtin 1981) and the data included aspects of a heroic journey such as: the notion of key events, 'trials' or turning points and significant or miraculous objects viewed as the accoutrements of a journey. The notion of journeying foregrounds affirmative dimensions of the student experience. It also enables us to focus on the socio-cultural context in which these literacies take place.

The notion of a journey is a positive one and this in its turn enables us to explore students' perspectives of academic literacies affirmatively (Turner 1998). The positive framing of the journey metaphor provides an alternative to literature in which academic writing is considered as problematic (Lillis 2001; Ivanić 1998; Lea and Street 1998). Journeys imply purposeful action towards a destination notwithstanding the challenges and digressions on route. The metaphor suggests persistence and progress in searching for and acquiring knowledge. The idea of a journey also suggests that the narrator is viewed as a hero or heroine on a quest offering an unusual viewpoint on how the students make sense of their academic literacies. As a result, details which might

otherwise seem insignificant can be viewed in alternative ways. For instance, the notion of academic tools as objects a hero carries on a journey allows us to consider these in new ways and appreciate their significance. For instance, the objects brought to the first interview can be framed as the miraculous objects the hero takes on a journey such as Lucy's pens, Tony's book, Cathy's chocolate and Hilary's laptop. These miraculous objects offer support but also have an almost magical or talisman-like significance and this helps to illuminate the intensity and authenticity of these experiences.

It is helpful to focus on the term quest which is based on the cognate 'question' related to finding or seeking answers. For example, a quest in literature is a significant journey towards a goal which involves a hero who overcomes obstacles and is tested as he or she travels onward. This in turn implies positive movement towards a goal. Although the participants acknowledge the difficulties on the path their narratives about academic literacies are based on a fundamentally positive perspective. In fact, it would seem that they position themselves as heroes setting out to achieve a goal growing older and wiser as their journey proceeds. Their academic studies can be represented as a journey with choices, setbacks and meetings on route.

The participants used metaphorical language related to journeying concerned with achieving an objective. This would seem to be part of how they themselves made sense of their academic literacies. For example Bella used terms such as 'goal' and 'progress'. This is related to Bakhtin's (1981:130) points linking journeying and searching for knowledge. Bakhtin noted that in certain ancient biographies or autobiographies the notion of the life course of one seeking true knowledge is presented. He termed this the 'seeker's path'. Bella and Lucy both appeared to see themselves as on this seeker's path and discussed their ultimate goal of becoming teachers. Tony focused on how happy he would be when a particular assignment was finished. Hilary discussed the transition between school and university. Journeying highlights the aspirations, ambition and sense of purpose of the participants. Journeying was part of how they made sense of academic literacies and integrated them into their lives.

In addition, there were times when actions seemed to lie outside normal time sequences. These included examples such as Hilary's journey through the

snow or the moments late at night in the library. The focus on time highlighted the relationship between academic literacies and everyday life. There was also a notable disjunction between how participants made sense of time and the ordered and linear timescales and expectations of the institution (Mann 2008). These significant moments often related to non-negotiable university time-scales. These moments seemed to be viewed by the students as ‘ordeals’ they needed to overcome. This links to the adventure novel of travel, discussed by Bakhtin (1981), which involved testing the hero through ordeals and turns of fate and chance. These moments do represent stumbling blocks but there was also a fundamental sense of moving towards a goal which highlighted students’ agency in negotiating the demands of academic literacies.

This positive aspect of journeying has been highlighted. Temporal and spatial ideas were also very significant in the participants’ accounts and we can think about these in terms of Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of *the chronotope* (see section 3.9). This theory emerged from an analysis of literary genres, in which, as Bakhtin explained, the hero travelled through time and space on ‘the path of life’ (1981:120). For example, Bakhtin noted there is a specific ‘chronotope of the road’ (1981:243) in which the literary hero moved through time and into different spaces on a journey. There were new departures and places where particular events took place and different turns and choices were made on route. These narratives allowed time to, as he put it to, ‘thicken and become artistically visible’ (1981:85). Bakhtin used the term chronotope to express the inseparability of time and space and he suggested that a chronotope characterised a text’s relationship to reality.

In Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope the following three aspects were particularly important. The following table (1) takes each aspect in turn and notes its relevance to this study:

Chronotopes:	In the case of this study:
1) are the organising centres for the narrative events of the novel. They have the meaning that shapes the narrative;	chronotopes are encountered in participants’ narratives during interviews;

2) are typical movements from place to place with their associated times of passage and pacing of events;	chronotopes can be identified in the typical movements that take place in a 'journey towards assignment deadlines';
3) represent a routinisation of life on longer timescales than individual events or activities.	chronotopes illuminate the patterning and timescales of academic literacy lives.

**Table 1 NCRM Glossary 2012: 9**

A focus on chronotopes highlights the significance of both time and space in how students experience academic literacies. From this perspective, both spatial concerns and timescales are given equal weighting and can be seen as the organising centre of the students' narratives. Certainly, the participants' narratives drew on details about time and space that helped to create authenticity and a sense of truthfulness. These details emphasised how these literacies were integrated into their everyday lives. Examples of this include the notice Tony pinned to his bedroom wall. This reminded him on a continual basis to get back to work when assignment deadlines loomed. A further example includes Cathy's narrative in which her boyfriend brought food to her as she worked on an assignment in the library in the middle of the night.

The examples of chronotopes included in the extracts discussed in chapter 6 demonstrate typical movement from place to place and the relevant passage of time related to academic literacies and in particular assignment completion. For instance, the participants moved between their family homes, their student bedrooms and the library whilst focusing on finishing assignments. Hilary moved to the library just before her assignment was due and described a hushed and secluded corner in the early hours of the morning. The space and time were both significant. Everything in this part of the library was quiet and still.

Hilary also discussed her ongoing relationship with her mother in their family home over time. This was a chronotope focusing on the routinisation of life over long timescales and links to the layering of remembered experiences.

Research in the New Literacy Studies tradition focused on similar themes, for example Compton-Lilly's (2008) study in which a child's reading is seen in terms of time-scales. This relates to the idea that we are historical beings and that our biography and history interweave with the present and our immediate deadlines and concerns merge with more general and ongoing concepts of time and space.

Chronotopes offer an opportunity to grasp the concrete and tangible nature of literacy practices and how these practices are shaped by both specific and general time and space contexts. Chronotopes provide what Allan (1994) termed materiality of language about time and space. He argued that this offers a focus on the *social* and the *affective* dimensions of texts. As Allan (1994) explained, time and space are part of the truth claims of a text. In other words, the chronotope grounds a text or speech in the realities of life allowing empathetic recognition in the audience or reader. These temporal and spatial dimensions in the students' narratives created concrete 'flesh and blood' moments that were both specific and particular and yet represented typical moments.

For example, we understood the tense atmosphere in the library late at night and the importance of finding a secluded spot. Tony's notice helped us to realise that he feels unable to concentrate without constant reminders. The seriousness of working in the library until late is emphasised by Cathy's boyfriend bringing food to her. All these instances provided fascinating insights into the way the personal lives of the students were integrated with their academic literacies. A natural sense was created about how time unfolds within spatial relations. These considerations were highlighted as important aspects of social action.

In essence, as Harden (2008) explained, the chronotope heightens awareness of the concrete nature of representations by situating people in time and space. In a study designed to look broadly at student experiences of academic literacies the notion of chronotope provided a very useful theoretical tool for exploring how students presented and made sense of their experiences.



I have argued that the theme of a journey offers significant insights into the overlap between students' personal and their academic literacy experiences. Yet it is possible that the research design itself generated findings which foregrounded the theme of journeying. For example, during interviews I asked participants to focus on objects, people and places associated with their academic literacies. This may well have led to this emphasis since journeys generally involve these three elements. Riessman (2008) when discussing narrative interviews argues that participants create stories drawing on time and space to shape their accounts. Indeed, the notion of a learning journey situated in time and space is a common metaphor and people tend to use language connected with journeys to describe academic progress in a taken for granted way (Turner 1998). However, despite this proviso, the notion of journeying was not part of the research plan. The idea arose from close study of the data and was not considered beforehand. The idea was raised with the participants in the participant review *after* the interviews had taken place.

There is, however, a reservation about how journeys are conceived. Generally, any discussion of a narrative journey suggests *linear* movement. The journeying theme created a sense of academic literacies as forward movement through time and space. This perhaps underplays the fluidity of social experiences in the participants' accounts. If academic literacy practices are only viewed as linear and progressive some of the complexity of practices through time and space identified, for example, by Lemke (2001), Leander (2004) and Leander and McKim (2003) are in danger of being ignored. In contrast, the second theme provided insights into students' experience of academic literacies which complemented the journeying theme by highlighting the complexity and fluidity of experiences.

The first theme of journeying and the inclusion of both space and time dimensions provided an understanding of positive engagement. Indeed, in this study rather than being a mere backdrop, time and space were fore-grounded as significant dimensions of social research.

## **7.2 Exploring the identity theme.**

I now move on to discuss the second theme of academic literacies and identity work. Certainly, the examples provided in chapter 6 highlighted how academic

literacies were associated with identities which flowed and reformed across time and space. From this point of view, the notion of 'identity work' captures some of the fluidity of academic literacy experiences. As I began to argue at the end of the last section, the metaphor of a journey can be seen as linear whereas identities can be fluctuating, interwoven and intersecting. A focus on the nature and plurality of identity work therefore provides further complementary insights into the data.

However, identity work can be a slippery notion. For example, Moje and Luke (2009) argue that literacy and identity studies often demonstrate a lack of theoretical clarity. They contend that merely acknowledging identities as social, fluid, or recognised by others provides only part of the theoretical picture. Indeed, the term identity work is used in social research generally and literacy studies in particular but is not always specifically defined. The following two points provide the definition drawn on in this study:

- identities were performed (Moje and Luke 2009) or 're-storied' as participants produced the ongoing narrative of self during the interviews;
- identities were sedimented in anecdotes and memories taking the form of narrative.

The notions of identities as performed and identities as sedimented in memories are explored in greater detail later in this section.

The theme of identity work does overlap, to some extent, with the theme of time-space and journeying. Indeed, recent studies drawing on NLS perspectives suggested that time and space are important markers of identity. For example, Lemke (2001); Rowsell (2008); Compton Lilly (2008) all focused on space and or time considerations linked to identity. In the previous section, journeying was conceived primarily as forward moving. However, from Lemke's (2001) perspective time was seen as something that was experienced in circular and non-linear ways as people drew on past experiences and considered future hopes and expectations.

Certainly, the theme of identity work can be viewed as entangled with fluid notions of time and space. The participants' stories exemplified how time was experienced in recursive ways contributing to current and future identity and identities. All five participants shared particular memories from their personal

lives that related to academic literacies and how they positioned themselves in relation to it – sharing such memories would seem to be an important part of their identity work. In their narratives, academic literacies seemed to be a site for doing things like crafting an identity as a university student and struggling with new ways of being (Lillis (2001). Undoubtedly, analysis of these students' presentation of these practices provided insight into a multiplicity of ways in which academic literacies threaded through their complex lives.

In the interview situation, participants took part in identity work in the two ways presented in the definition above. Firstly, they produced or *performed* their identities through narratives in the interview itself. Secondly, they *narrated* stories and anecdotes which presented their identity. In performing and narrating themselves in this way their identity work became recursive and *fluid*. The students performed their identities during the interview whilst also providing interesting glimpses of their personal and academic literacies worlds through their fluid narrations.

The first notion - that social actors perform their identity - is a significant one and is discussed in chapter 3. Through their narratives, in this study, the students did indeed position themselves as social actors taking an *active* part in producing and performing their own identities. In other words the participants narrated examples in which they acted agentically. As Holland et al (1998:5) argued, 'human agency may be frail' but it deserves our attention. They presented themselves as having active identities continually forming and reforming alongside the multiplicities of academic literacies. For example, Hilary performed her identity as someone who makes effective academic choices whereas Bella presented an affirmative experience from her schooling which helped her to perform an identity as someone who demonstrated confidence about her current academic literacies. Lucy related a narrative in which she gets her dyslexia 'sorted out'. Similarly Tony told an anecdote showing how he acted agentically in changing to a course which suited his sense of self as a creative person. Elsewhere, Cathy demonstrated her determination to succeed despite negative comments from her school teachers. In these narratives, told during the interviews, participants performed useful student identities promoting a

positive academic self-image highlighting the sense that they do have some agency in their lives.

The second notion that identities are sedimented through narratives refers to Pahl (2007) and Rowsell's and Pahl's (2007) ideas about sedimented identity (see section 3.6). The idea refers to layers of identity forming over time. In this study narratives of identity were often related to objects brought to the interviews. This foregrounded the significance of materiality in social practice. The objects themselves created links from the past to the present and became a way of explaining the participants' evolving literate identities. This links to further ethnographic work carried out by Pahl (2004) in which shared discussions of objects often formed connections to family histories and cultural identities. Indeed, the objects in this study such as the great-grandfather's notebook, the favourite children's book and the old exercise books used for current note-taking all allowed participants to carry out some personal re-evaluation and re-storying of their experiences which provided links to their past and projections into their futures. Academic literacy experiences and references to different timescales intermingled with the presentation of fluid and multiple identities through these artefacts.

These narratives conveyed a sense of fluidity as the students' moved seamlessly to and fro, relating experiences to their past, present and future selves. For example, Hilary's old notebooks linked her present self to her family history and represented an emphasis on the values of academic study which merged into her motivations to succeed in her academic futures. Bella read a book to pupils in a placement school and remembered how significant this book was to her as a child. This incident served to merge her past and present and integrated with her ambition to be a teacher. In a similar way the dyslexia sticker reminded Lucy of her past identity struggles and her determination to achieve her future goals despite obstacles on the way. Tony's great-grandfather's book was a key element in forging his early identity around creativity and literacy. He remembered it fondly and brought it into his current studies by focusing part of an assignment on an extract from the book. His emphasis on creativity motivated and provided a projection for his future self. Cathy felt scarred by some of her academic literacy experiences in school and her current strong motivation to succeed related to these histories. The narratives seemed to be

interwoven with the present, past and future. Indeed, the notion of fluid identities that move and change through time and space does seem to contradict some of the certainties presented in the previous section in which students' academic literacies are enacted within the metaphor of a linear journey .

In the presentation of the data in chapter 6 there was emphasis on identity work constructed over time and different spaces. In particular, there was a focus on past experiences and how these shaped past and current identities suggesting a linear movement towards a destination. Other narratives however, suggested a much more fluid relationship between identity, time and space. Students may have presented themselves as taking part in heroic journeys in which they encountered key moments of change, readjustment and reassessment of self. However, their stories were often fluid rather than linear and their present experiences often seemed to relate back to the past and forwards to the future.

Indeed, literacy practices can provide opportunities to explore and develop new identities and ways of being and also unsettle and disturb existing identities. In addition, literacy practices can be seen as tools for representing, performing and mediating particular identities. This suggests a more fluid relationship to time and space which complements the notion of academic literacies as a journey.

### **7.3 Exploring the theme of emotional struggle.**

This section considers the third theme: the emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines, highlighting how all the individuals in the study referred to the emotional charge of their academic literacy practices. Emotions involving stress and struggle were highlighted in the students' narratives, the language they used, and in some of the objects brought to the sessions. Diary entries also focused on the strain that assignment deadlines, in particular, created in students' personal lives. This section emphasises this emotional aspect of students' academic literacy lives and explores how this theme provides additional insights into how students integrate academic literacies into their lives.

Before continuing the discussion it is worth noting that 'stress' tends to be a slippery concept used in a taken-for-granted way in everyday speech (Whitman et al 1986). Robotham and Julian (2006) provided a useful summary of the definition of stress as a perception that an individual cannot cope with a particular situation. Stress, according to these authors, is related to fear and the body's response for either 'fight' or 'flight'. They noted that because of differences between individuals the same situation is regarded as stressful by one person but not by another. In fact, in this study, the four female students referred to stress and struggle more often than the one male, Tony. He did discuss one particular incident cited below but played it down saying that he was annoyed rather than being in a state of panic. This could be an example of people framing their response differently to what might be considered to be stressful situations.

Stress can also be seen as operating beyond the individual level as something intrinsic to contemporary social lives (Hobfoll 2004). Indeed, students as a group are bound to feel that various aspects of their academic experience, in particular assignment deadlines, are stressful. Yet, the term 'stress', is often used quite loosely to describe any form of slight anxiety. It could, in fact, be seen as a kind of contemporary 'trope'. Certainly, the term was used repeatedly in the interviews as if this was something to be expected and perhaps this meant that actual levels of anxiety were not at the extreme level as might, at first sight, seem to be the case.

In summary, the data from the students demonstrated that university life and in particular academic work can be a struggle and can lead to loss of confidence and heightened states of anxiety. Workload, assessment and deadlines whilst providing some appropriate pressure to ensure that the job is done can also be profoundly stressful and undermining and there were highly charged moments in the participants' narratives as they presented their academic literacy experiences. Examples included: Hilary's expedition in snow-bound conditions to deliver an assignment and her unhealthy fast-food eating habits before assignment deadlines; Tony's moment of complete self-doubt in the early hours of the morning and his last minute 'panic writing' and Cathy's computer failure that was only resolved at the eleventh hour. The picture was of an emotional roller-coaster including feelings of uncertainty and unworthiness. Lucy

commented: 'you've got the world on your shoulders.' The participants gave accounts of feeling unsure and alone in a difficult new world (as in Mann's 2008 study).

Lack of confidence with literacy practices leading to stress seemed to be a theme, as was dealing with the pressures associated with handling multiple assignment deadlines. Indeed, at particular times during the academic cycle the students described varying degrees of stress which sometimes reached crisis point. Certainly, the students' narratives demonstrated that struggle and stress were an intrinsic part of academic life for students. All the participants in the study described, in one way or another, their experiences of emotional struggles particularly around writing assignments. Terms such as 'intensity', 'panic', 'pressure' and 'stress' were all used and there was a sense, that in some aspects, the participants felt powerless.. Studying would seem to create strong feelings of anxiety, loss of confidence, tension and struggle as well as the pleasures of success and the excitement of intellectual pursuits. The participants' narratives did provide a sense of an emotional texture to university life experienced, in particular, in the pressures around assessment periods.

Stress includes the notion of pressure points and the sense of being out of control at these particular moments. For example, as cited at the beginning of section 6.3, Hilary wrote in a diary entry that she was 'cracking like an egg'. What are perhaps important are the strategies or tactics that are used at these points of pressure. For instance, all the participants discussed how they drew on the support of friends, course mates and family at difficult times. It was important to them to be part of a community not just an individual struggling with their own academic literacy practices.

An example of support valued by the participants was the opportunity to communicate outside the formal structures of the university. Through using social media they drew on channels that were part of their everyday literacy practices and their personal lives. It was not explicitly stated but they appeared to be more in control of these modes of communication in a way that they could not be in the university sanctioned Virtual Learning Environment (see Burnett (2011) and Davies (2006)). Indeed, four out of the five participants communicated about their literacy practices and collaborated through the social

media site Facebook. The fifth participant (Tony) used texting to communicate with friends on the course about his studies. This non-formal communication and collaboration appeared to be significant in terms of the time spent but was viewed by participants with mixed feelings. As noted in section 6.2, the communication, even if it was focused on learning was also seen as a distraction as well as a positive feature of academic experience.

There was also a sense that some of the narratives concerned with particular stressful moments were oft-repeated tales used to validate and demonstrate how challenges had been successfully overcome. A case in point is Hilary's 'epic' tale giving us insight into the physicality of her world as she trudged through the snow to deliver an assignment (see 6.3). Feeling stressed by academic work can be seen as an approved way of being, providing a kind of status for the student - in that academic work is being given due significance. There was a sense that the participants were making a claim to be taken seriously as students who cared about what they were doing. This contrasted with the notion that some students were stress-free and careless. The stress stories may have been told to family and friends to position themselves as people genuinely committed to their studies but finding the whole process difficult. This links with the points made about presentation of self as part of identity work in the previous section.

The context within which these struggles existed would also seem to be significant. Mann (2008:27), pointed out, that studying is not a natural or neutral activity. Students bring their own funds of knowledge and social practices to bear but these are not always recognised by the academy. Mann (2008) referred to studies about student stress which also would appear to support the findings from this research (for example: Robotham and Julian 2006; Swaner 2007). Mann listed key stressors, such as assessment, time and workload pressures, financial problems, new eating and sleeping arrangements, part-time work, new responsibilities and adjustment to establishing a new life (Mann 2008:2). She argued that study affects people's lives and is linked to relations of power within society. Indeed, the students in this study were subject to the rules of the university and, as Lillis (2001) noted, they were working within a tradition which privileges essayist literacy practice. However, they were also bringing their own individual histories and experiences to bear. In turn, their



individual experiences were shaped by a particular socio-cultural context and their response to this context.

Highlighting stress and struggle as a theme does make it clear that often what students seem to be saying when noting that they are stressed is that they are not in control and feel powerless. Robotham (2008), in a critical review of studies dealing with stress and the HE student, noted that not enough time and feeling out of control were seen as the top stressors. Certainly, the students in this study focused on their feelings about the stressful nature of deadlines and how these impacted on their lives.

It could be argued that, academic literacies as an emerging field of study has not yet fully considered the emotional strand of student experience. In the *Literacy Lives* study (Barton et al 2007) there was more emphasis on the affective domain than in some of the earlier work. Yet, in the influential study which introduced key distinctions around academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998) such concerns were not addressed. Although not a primary concern, two key studies (Lillis 2001: Ivanič 1998) do consider emotional concerns. Ivanič (1998:228) discussed disowned identities, cynicism and alienation, and Lillis used the term 'desire' to encapsulate the affective domain. However, one small scale study which paid attention to emotions was a case study of three students (Benson et al 1994). This study emphasised how early literacy experiences impacted on writing academic essays. These case studies highlighted struggles to gain entry to the world of academic literacy and focused on wider lives, the importance of jobs, families, places and people associated with learning. The frustrations and pains as well as the joys of learning were highlighted. Unfortunately, this study was never followed up beyond the original three students and remains one of the few studies in the 1990s with a strong focus on broader literacy lives and in particular emotional considerations.

As we have seen, researchers in the academic literacy field have not tended to focus on how feelings play out and how these relate to academic literacies. Yet, despite the lack of emphasis on the affective dimension in literature, emotional considerations were significant in this particular study. These concerns were foregrounded in participants' accounts and helped to create a sense of the rich texture of their academic literacy lives.

Focusing on the affective domain of academic literacies provides a different way of viewing students' broader literacy experiences. The theme underlines the lived experience of academic literacies - the human side of literacy life- and ensures that literacy practices are seen as being important aspects of people's lives. Academic literacies do not happen in isolation and the collaborative rather than individual nature of many of the narratives emphasised this point. However, emotional struggles, as part of academic literacies, would seem to be a silenced and under-theorised area of study.

## 7.5 Chapter summary

The data provided access to the participants' academic literacy worlds through rich descriptions, artefacts and narratives. People, places, spaces and cultural objects were all highlighted in this study. This focus enabled me to explore how students perceived their literacies and how these intermingled and integrated with their everyday lives. Examples included: the relevance of food such as chocolate or a Gregg's pasty, significant books from childhood, symbolic objects such as a dyslexia sticker or an old notebook, descriptions of overnight sojourns in the library, a narrative highlighting a trek across the snow to deliver assignments, discussions in student bedrooms, 'chatting' about assignments on Facebook and stories of past literacy experiences influencing current practices and attitudes. These narratives and incidents allowed me to describe and analyse the students' experiences and provided insights into how academic literacies were integrated into both personal and academic lives.

The three themes, journeying, identity work and emotional struggles provided an overview of academic literacy experiences as: positively orientated, fluid and recursive, offering opportunities for agentic action and concerned with the affective dimension of life including the significance of relationships and collaborations with others. These themes complemented each other offering a complex and nuanced view of academic literacies. The focus was also broader than that of much of the current academic literacies literature (see chapter 2) illuminating the interaction with people and objects across different sites and spaces. In this study through the richness of the data and the insights from thematic analysis academic literacies were seen as positively orientated,

collaborative not individual; associated with fluidity, not fixed and multiply framed not unitary.

In summary, this chapter has considered three overlapping themes which provide a nuanced view of the complex worlds of academic literacies as experienced by students. The theme of a journey provided positive and progressive perspectives that focused on the significance of time and space, whereas the theme of identity work provided insight into the fluid nature of academic literacies and into opportunities for agency. Finally, the theme of emotional struggles emphasised the importance of the affective domain.

## 8. Conclusion

This final chapter brings together discussions on the following: a summary of the data and findings linked to the research questions; claims for the original contribution of this study; limitations of the study; suggestions for future research and implications for practice.

### 8.1 Summary of the findings

In this study I aimed to:

- describe and analyse students' narratives about academic literacies;
- explore student perspectives of academic literacies;
- consider the socio-cultural context in which students' academic literacies take place and the interrelationship between literacy practice and everyday life.

I aimed to do this through addressing the following research questions:

- How do undergraduate Education Studies students make sense of academic literacies?
- How do undergraduate Education Studies students integrate academic literacies into their own lives (their personal and academic lives)?

In relation to the first research question students made sense of their academic literacies in the following ways:

- through creating narratives which gave insight into the trajectories of their academic literacies through time and space;
- through highlighting the multiply framed and fluid nature of their academic literacies;
- through performing useful student identities creating positive self-images and the possibility of agentic action;
- through emphasising that struggle and stress were an intrinsic part of academic life and noting how their feelings about the stressful nature of deadlines impacted on their personal social and academic life.

In relation to the second research question, they integrated academic literacies into their lives by:

- creating a focusing on the significance of drawing on collaborative relationships for example through the use of informal support using the social media site Facebook;
- identifying clear goals that may or may not have coincided with those specified by the university.

In the previous chapter the three themes of journeying, identity and affective concerns were discussed. Each theme provided insight into the students' experience of academic literacies offering challenges to some current conceptions of academic literacies (see chapter 2). For instance, as summarised above, the themes emphasised the following notions about the participants' academic literacies: these could be viewed positively; they were multiply framed not a unitary concept; that these literacy practices were associated with fluidity and not fixed and were seen as collaborative not individual.

The three themes offered alternative viewpoints. For example, a focus on the academic literacies as a journey provided an account of a linear trajectory. A focus on identities across time suggested a more fluid, complex and nuanced view. Considering the affective domain took a standpoint which focused on the individual's emotional and often collaborative world ignoring some of the sense of agency highlighted by an identities theme. In other words each theme highlighted a different aspect of students' academic literacies. However, if viewed together, the three themes provided a richness and complexity that shed light on the depth and variety of these academic literacy lives. More detail is given in the section that follows.

## **8.2 Original contribution**

In order to summarise claims for the original contribution made by this study, I begin with a reminder of the important ideas about student experience of academic literacies from the literature. As Ivanić and Lea (2006) explained, over the last decades significant changes in higher education have taken place. There has been a huge expansion and development of a mass higher education system. As a result class size has increased and material resources decreased. Student experience is no longer of individual discipline-based tuition. In addition, many students, often the first generation to study at university, have applied to study less discipline-focused and more vocationally-based courses. This has brought new challenges and demands. As a result of this and the National Student Satisfaction Survey launched in 2005, Mann (2008) argued that universities were responding more specifically to student support needs, in particular, the need for help with academic literacy. Certainly this study focused

on the participants' sense that academic literacies created an emotional charge in their everyday lives.

Students' experience of academic literacies has been charted from a New Literacy Studies perspective in a range of studies (Ivanić 1998, Lillis 2001, Lea and Street 1998). Insights have included the notion that universities need to move beyond a skills model of literacy and take into account the power base of the institution. In particular, studies have highlighted the importance of listening to students' views. As a result of this emphasis, for example, Lillis (1999) argued that students have a sense that there is a lack of clarity about practices that means that students cannot explore their identity as academic learners. However, studies in the academic literacies field, whilst providing a much needed focus on students' voices, have also missed out some of the depth and complexity of literacies in everyday lives. Indeed, the studies have focused almost exclusively on the written dimension of academic literacy experience.

This study attempted to address this balance. It challenged the current focus of academic literacies on academic writing which overlooked some of this richness of situated literacy experience. The study adopted a broader focus concentrating not just on reading as well as writing but on the relationship between everyday life and academic literacy practices. It looked at what participants took from their lives into their academic literacy practices and what fed back from these practices into their lives. As a result of this definition, the study provided a rich viewpoint allowing the reader a sense of the patterning of literacies against the backdrop, for example, of life in a student bedroom, the library or the interactions on the social media site Facebook.

The study highlighted three dimensions of this relationship between everyday life and academic literacy practices: by seeing student experiences of academic literacies as a journey, and as a site for identity work and emotional struggle. Each theme provided insights into the participants' narratives. However, the themes did not exist in isolation. They were enmeshed or interwoven together and this intermingling provided a more finely granulated view. For example, the theme of journeying, as already noted, implied linear forward motion. Enmeshing journeying with the theme of identities suggested a more multifaceted notion with movement backwards and forwards through time and

space as participants engaged in their identity work. The theme of emotional struggles recognised an underemphasised part of student and academic literacies life and helped to situate the previous themes recognising the lived world of the students' experiences. These themes are original responses to the data that highlighted the complex, nuanced and socially-embedded nature of the participants' academic literacy lives.

Furthermore, this multi-theme approach provides us with perspectives that complement those offered by prior researchers. A focus on journeying suggests a more positive analysis of academic literacies than the current somewhat deficit notion that many students have little access to what Lillis (1999) calls institutional practices of 'mystery'. A journey suggests a positive trajectory towards a goal; although there may be blocks on the way ultimately a destination is reached. The focus on identity supports a rich and complex view of literacy lives which operated across fluid spaces and recursive time-frames. In particular, the theme of identity highlights the significance of human action and agency seeing people as active in creating their own destinies. For example, the participants performed their identity in the interview situation creating and recreating their academic literacy selves. Finally, focusing on the affective domain ensures that the complexity and richness of everyday life and its relation to academic literacies was not underplayed. Certainly, a focus on the affective dimension of academic literacies helps to create a sense of the rich texture of student lives. The three themes offer different ways of seeing the data and interweaving these interpretations provides insights into the richness and complexity of the integration of academic literacies in students' lives.

In particular, the notion of chronotopes is a significant one. In the same way that chronotopes were seen as the organising centres for events in a novel, the narrative events related by the participants become central when viewed in this way (NCRM Glossary 2012). The participants' stories focused on typical movements from place to place with associated timing and pacing of events. Examples included, the story Hilary relates of trudging through the snow to hand in an assignment, or Cathy's late night sojourn in the library during which her boyfriend brings food, or Tony's panic when he realises that he is stuck with very little time before his assignment deadline runs out. Viewing these stories as chronotopes helps us to identify the routine nature of life over longer

timescales in which these events were part of a larger patterning of experience in time and space (NCRM Glossary 2012). Indeed, as noted in chapter 3, a focus on chronotopes highlights the significance of both time and space in influencing perceptions about literacy practices.

Innovative methodology is a further contribution made by the study. The elicitation devices which included objects and images brought to each interview by participants helped to illuminate the depth and variety of literacy practices embedded in everyday life. Particular objects seemed to take on a symbolic intensity. For example, the Greggs paper bag represented the unhealthy food eaten during stressful assignment writing and the great-grandfather's book symbolised the complex and interrelated timescales in which family history motivated and supported a student's current endeavours. The objects also gave participants an opportunity to consider what they were prepared to share with the researcher redressing some of the imbalance in the power relationship between researcher and participants. The visual images provided another source of data again representing some of the richness and complexity of literacy and everyday lives. This relates to Pahl and Rowsell's (2010) work which emphasised the power of artefacts to evoke lived experience and cultural meanings related to literacy. Indeed, the methodological contribution of this study is the use of artefacts to elicit insights into broader student lives.

In summary, this study makes an original contribution by:

- providing a broad focus not just on academic reading and writing but on literacy practices embedded in everyday lives;
- drawing on three interwoven themes to illuminate academic literacies;
- using the notion of chronotopes to highlight the significance of time and space in influencing perceptions about literacy practice;
- designing innovative methodology in which participants based narratives on significant objects brought to interviews.

### **8.3 Limitations of the study**

This study was very small scale with very limited resources. It needs to be acknowledged that despite the interesting and varied data, the sample was very small with participants being drawn from only one programme of related courses at one university. This meant that there was little variety in the background, age, aspirations and previous experience of the students. They



were young, white and British. Students from a range of different discipline areas may have provided very different insights. In addition, I was known to the students either just by name or as someone who taught on their particular course. This may well have made a difference to the results meaning that particular stories were more or less likely to be shared because of my connection and position of power as a lecturer and tutor at their university and in their department.

Also, despite efforts to bracket out my own experience, inevitably I imposed my own interpretations. Indeed, it was difficult to have enough *distance* in relation to understanding the world of academic literacies because as an academic tutor on the participants' course I was an insider in this world. Dicks et al (2011) suggested that the value of *distance* has long been debated, for example, is it better to have empathetic engagement or does distance facilitate a greater objectivity and understanding? These writers suggested there can be a creative tension between the two stances but certainly it was necessary to bear in mind the interpretations that might escape someone with an insider position.

Furthermore, unlike some of the other studies in the field (see Barton et al 2007) the data was based only on accounts from the participants and did not involve any first-hand experience of the participants' academic literacies. Indeed, as Lillis (2008) pointed out, interviews, particularly if they are one-off, can only ever provide insignificant glimpses of participants' perspectives and understandings. Lillis argued that there is a danger of reifying these views which have only been expressed in one moment in time and therefore, 'oversimplifying claims framed in relation to such data' (Lillis 2008:361). For example, in this study although a series of interviews were carried out there was no field work or observation of practices in the library or lecture theatres to support the perspectives provided during interviews. This is in contrast to studies on how children become literate within naturalistic settings such as home or school (Heath 1983; Pahl 2005). Fieldwork would have provided a greater focus on the processes and contexts of the participants' everyday academic literacy practices rather than a more individualised focus on each student and the artefacts and images brought to interviews.

## 8.4 Suggestions for future research

Undergraduate university students are a diverse group and this was a very small scale project. Further studies within the NLS tradition drawing on different contexts and disciplines would inevitably provide a wider range of data. It would be useful to draw on representative student populations across a range of establishments and disciplines to explore any similarities and differences between different cohorts in different contexts. Indeed, Lillis and Scott (2007) supported this point noting that current work tends to be small scale and serendipitous rather than selective in design thus inhibiting empirical and theoretical developments in the field of academic literacies. For example, a longitudinal study focusing on sustained engagement and drawing on interviews over time would provide greater insights into this field over a longer time span. Furthermore, a focus on emotional responses to academic literacies could also provide a useful focus as this is an underrepresented aspect of current literature.

More work could be done exploring particular methods, such as the ones in this study, which took a broad view of academic literacies. For example, it would be valuable to take the notion of materiality further through a focus on objects discussed during interviews or photographed or filmed by the participants which could be explored as the main focus of studies. This emphasis on artefacts could provide valuable developments offering alternatives to standard qualitative semi-structured interview procedures and providing openings for explorations in which participants have greater choice and agency over the direction of discussions. A focus on this area would offer more nuanced views on student experiences. Finally, a study that drew on broader methods, not just interviews, and included observation of student academic literacy practices would offer further potential. Indeed observation has often been part of NLS studies. For example, in a recent study set in South Africa, Paxton (2012) summarised useful new foci for academic literacies research. She recommended using a range of methods including classroom observation, student life histories and 'talk around texts'. She made the point that researchers often misunderstand utterances because they are not aware of the contexts students are drawing from and suggested that solely linguistically based studies can therefore be inadequate. Paxton supported Lillis's (2008)

argument for a more prolonged ethnographic style of research which engaged with participants over extended time-scales as well as drawing on a range of types of data. This would indeed seem to be a fruitful direction for further research.

### **8.5 Implications for practice**

One of the main implications for practice arising from this study is the importance of talking in depth with students. Indeed, quite tellingly, students found the interview sessions therapeutic and liberating. It is beneficial to have these kinds of conversations and to note the differences between how a university frames academic literacy experience and student framings. The academy has very fixed timescales and procedures which are accepted in a taken-for-granted way. Yet these often contrast with students' fluid time-scales which are over-layered by childhood experiences and everyday life. Certainly, institutions need to broaden their conceptions of academic literacies and their ways of doing things.

One way universities can tune into complex and multi-layered experience is by listening to student voices. An example is that of assignment hand-in. The lived experience of this for each individual student is often emotional and complex whereas the institution would seem to be only interested in processes. This study demonstrated how much can be learned through individuals' stories yet these kinds of narratives are often lost in the performative culture of the academy. As a result of the in-depth insights generated through the interviews I became aware of an increased need for sensitivity when listening and talking with students about their experiences. It is easy for academic staff to become wrapped up in the bureaucratic demands of university systems. Yet we need to take a broader view of academic literacies and the complex contexts of student lives. In addition, there are aspects of students' digital worlds that are often ignored. For example, four out of five of the participants in this study communicated informally through Facebook. Universities have their own electronic networks whereas these students tended to prefer to communicate informally outside the official structures. This needs to be recognised and valued without necessarily encroaching on and taking over these practices.

Furthermore, university systems, while well-intentioned, can often ignore the perspectives of individual students. The dyslexia sticker was an example of the need for sensitivity when interacting with students with any additional needs. Naming dyslexia as a disability in this fashion does recognise diversity and perhaps offers resources for identity work that may be positive for individuals but it is also deeply problematic. Lucy demonstrated some of these complexities by leaving the dyslexia sticker as the last object she talked about in the first interview. She had found the diagnosis helpful but was also ambivalent about being labelled in this way. This highlights the need for tutors and other relevant staff to listen and talk in depth with students and try to understand their perspectives.

## **8.6 Thesis Summary**

This study has focused on the lived experience of five undergraduate students providing a thickness of description (Geertz 1973) around the complexity and embeddedness of academic literacies in everyday life. It has challenged some of the existing definitions of academic literacies by focusing on broader literacy lives rather than academic writing. Drawing together the themes of journeying, identity and affective concerns has supported this broader definition. A focus on journeying and chronotopes has provided a more positive analysis of academic literacies than current literature and has allowed us to see that academic literacies do not simply exist in one university-centric time-space context but across multiple and fluid timescales and spaces.

The focus on identity has emphasised student agency as well as illustrating a complex and fluid view of literacy lives. Highlighting the affective domain has provided a sense of the emotional texture of literacy lives. The three themes have offered different ways of viewing the data and interweaving these interpretations has provided greater richness and complexity than one theme operating on its own.

This particular study drew from the tradition of academic literacies research. It focused on the broad context of academic reading and writing in participants' lives and their response to the objects, places and people they encountered. This illuminated the complex contexts in which they operated noting in particular the significance of assignment deadlines. This research focused on the wider

practices of student participants moving beyond a concentration on academic writing. As such it makes a contribution to knowledge addressing a gap in academic literacies research in which the focus has largely been on written university contexts.

Finally, the study has provided insights into human action and agency and sees people as active in creating their own destinies through the focus on journeying and multiple identities. The study has recognised the significant role of artefacts and material resources in academic literacies. The images and objects brought to interviews were very much part of the production of academic literacy identity. Indeed, the overall summary of this research is that it is impossible to remove literacy from the lived experience of academic life.

Word length:

43,128

## 9. Appendices

### 9.1 Academic Literacies Study: Consent Form

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Please complete this information if you are willing to take part in this research study

Name:

Date:

Email address(es):

Phone number(s):

Please answer the following questions by circling your responses:

Have you read and understood the information about this study?                      Yes  
No

Have you been able to ask questions about this study?                      Yes  
No

Have you received enough information about this study?                      Yes  
No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study ?

At any time?                      Yes                      No

Without giving a reason for your withdrawal?                      Yes                      No

Your responses will be anonymised before they are analysed.

Do you give permission for members of the research team to have access to your anonymised responses?

Yes

No

Do you give permission for copies/photos of visual material you provide to be used anonymously in published materials/research reports?

Yes

No

Do you agree to take part in the study?

Yes

No

Your signature will certify that you have voluntarily agreed to take part in this research study having read and understood the information sheet for participants. It will also certify that you have had sufficient opportunity to discuss the study with a researcher and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction.

Signature of participant.....

Date.....

Name (block letters) .....

Signature of investigator:.....

Date:.....

(Name, address, contact number of investigator.)

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

## 9.2 Research interview: pro-forma for reflective comments

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>	<b>Place:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Objects/Visual images</b></li><li>• <b>Reflections on setting and set up for interview</b></li><li>• <b>My role as interviewer</b></li><li>• <b>Comments on interpersonal aspects of interview, tone of voice, gestures, laughter,</b></li><li>• <b>After the tape was switched off</b></li><li>• <b>Reflections on themes</b></li></ul>			



## 9.3 Reflective notes on interview- Bella

**Bella: Education Studies Psychology and Counselling student: Interview One First Phase: 28.10.10 10.30-11.30 in Owen 1133 : Thursday morning school half term**

### List of objects

- owl
- gold star
- wand
- Children's picture book *When Sheep Cannot Sleep*
- Joahari window - handout from Counselling session

### Reflections on setting and set up for interview

We met in a small anonymous interview room. I moved furniture around the room before B arrived. I moved chairs so that she would be at my side rather than facing me across a rectangular table which felt too formal. My intention was to create a more intimate environment. The room however, was very institutionalised with reminders that we were in a university environment. We could hear low voices from the Helpdesk (although during the interview itself I wasn't really aware of this) and I could see some shapes of people in the waiting area through the opaque glass. The notice board had one notice about help for International students. There was a table behind us with a networked computer which was switched off but seemed a reminder of university matters. The room is kept locked and I got the key from the Helpdesk and arrived beforehand and set up the recorder etc. There are grey walls and a grey carpet. The mauve chairs are the only splash of colour. It is not an inviting room but it also has few if any connections to my role. It is in a different building from my office. In addition I dressed slightly differently to usual I was wearing a cardigan rather than a jacket to appear less formal.

- I asked for signed permissions - form completed
- I asked for agreement to take photos of the objects and to audio tape the interview
- I thanked B for her participation

### Comments on interpersonal aspects, tone of voice, gestures, laughter

B seemed quite nervous. She sat a long way away from the recorder which seemed to be part of her nervousness. She did relax as the interview progressed. Not much laughter took place and she seemed to be taking the process very seriously and had worried about the interview beforehand wondering what objects she should bring. She seemed to want to 'get it right' and give me what I wanted. Perhaps I didn't help enough with more informal comments and humour to create a relaxed situation. After some initial tension I thought our interpersonal interactions did become more relaxed although perhaps her posture - quite upright in her chair - was quite tense. However, she did seem very willing to talk at length. My concern was that it was perhaps a little intrusive to ask straight away about background information about her family etc.

### My role as interviewer

This was my first interview and I also was perhaps a little nervous. I had some anxieties that the objects were not what I anticipated and seemed to focus on B's past rather than her current academic literacies. On reflection however, I thought that there was an interesting focus on her academic literacies history. The objects seemed to be focused on a sequence in historical time. They also seemed to be largely emotionally/psychologically focused on key incidents that had led B to where she is now. I thought there might be 2 reasons for this

1) I had modelled objects connected with my professional career including a children's book and some early writing and B included a children's book and an object connected with a piece of her primary school writing.

2) Her course is Education, Psychology and Counselling. She spoke about her intense interest in what inspired her. I wondered whether there was a particular discipline focus in the way she responded.

One of the things I did which I haven't done much before was to check back as to whether I was interpreting what B said effectively. I'm not sure whether this entirely worked or not. On one occasion B said that I had put into her thoughts into words more effectively than she had. I was worried that I was in danger of influencing her and was not sufficiently distancing myself and bracketing out my own experience and views. I thought this also highlighted the danger of the power difference between tutor and student and also perhaps age and experience over youth and inexperience. Throughout the interview I thought that B was worried about 'trying to 'get it right' and perhaps please me as interviewer and possibly tutor.

### **After the tape was switched off**

I talked to B about some of the theoretical ideas about interviewing e.g. was I trying to find out what was in her head or whether meanings were constructed during the interview itself. B said that she had revealed things she hadn't thought of before and things 'popped' into her mind as she was talking. I asked how she felt and she said that she felt a bit uncomfortable and didn't like being the centre of attention. She didn't, as she put it, like being 'in the hot seat' and found presentations difficult but a 1-1 interview she found it easier with 1 person.

She spoke very positively about the support she was getting at university and I wondered how much she was telling me what she thought I wanted to hear.

Her final comments were that she had a tendency to drift off and she was worried that some of what she said wasn't useful and was off the point.

I talked about the next stages of the research. I asked her to do 2 short reflective diary pieces at the time of preparing for her next assessments 1 before Christmas and one after Christmas. She agreed to this and seemed happy about doing that. I also said that the focus of the next interview was on places where academic literacies took place. I would be asking her to bring images of these places along to the interview.

### **Reflections on themes - refocusing on proposal**

- Presentation of self through a strong narrative thread - identity presented as some one who needed to be passionate about what she did - strong sense of values
- Construction of reality during the interview itself
- Objects worked well as elicitation device - there was a long narrative about each object
- temporal dimensions were important - perhaps the notion of framing and reframing events over time
- Focus on how literacies interact with personal histories
- I had a sense she was continuing to construct her identity through the objects chosen
- There was a focus on the emotional aspects of academic literacies

## 9.4 Extract from reflective notes – Hilary

I was quite nervous. We were in a small meeting room in the science park which wasn't the best venue but the only one available at the time.

I felt H had gone to a lot of trouble. She arrived on time and was all organised. She laid out her objects in a particular sequence and went through them in a clockwise order. She spoke confidently. It was interesting that she said afterwards how surprised she was that the interview was very emotionally based and how in depth her responses were. After the tape was switched off she said that she had covered contextualised information and mind processes.

She sipped the water I had poured out for her. The room seemed very anonymous with bare greyish-white walls and 3 whiteboards with nothing written on them and a window into the office beyond but when sitting down you can't see through. Pink office chairs. Rather hot. We were right against a radiator. H took off her coat and just had a sleeveless T-shirt on.

It did feel intimate in our little space together. Objects also felt significant laid out in front of us. They had been specially chosen. There was a lot to say- little stories about each one and why they were important. I didn't seem to need to add many prompts and the conversation flowed without them. What sticks in my mind is the imaginative engagement with the task e.g. bringing a Greggs paper bag to represent the emotional significance of late nights and stresses of writing assignments and how some relationships were put on hold so she can complete these pressured tasks which matter greatly. The objects seemed to emphasise the significance of family. One incident in particular sticks in my mind. It is Christmas and H has to travel in the snow to deliver an assignment and push it under the office door to make sure it gets there on time. She notes how msn takes up so much time so she has to switch the internet off when the pressure mounts. She had a yellow 70s style notebook from her grandparents. There was a great deal of intensity in her voice and she used gestures to emphasise her feelings as well as repeating and emphasising certain words such as stress. Reflections on themes include the following:

- strong focus on literacy practice and everyday life e.g. the Greggs paper bag
- emotional aspect of academic literacies - stressed - pressure, switching off from relationships

### 9.5 'Pen portraits' of participants: Lucy, Hilary, Tony, Bella, Cathy

Lucy is a female 20 year old Education Studies and Sociology student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the Midlands. She worked as a nanny before starting at university and has a part time job in a department store. She lives in student accommodation with her boyfriend. She did a National Diploma rather than A levels. She has two sisters one who is older and one who is younger. The older sister is doing a Law degree.

Hilary is a female 19 year old English and Education Studies student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the North East. She works part time as a sales assistant and lives in student accommodation. She did A levels. She has one older brother and according to H. her parents are very supportive.

Tony is a male 22 year old English and Education Studies student in his second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. He started a Business degree which he didn't enjoy and then applied to change awards. His home town is in the South where his mother lives. His father lives in the North. He works part time in a restaurant and lives in student accommodation with four other students near the City centre. He did A levels and said that schooling didn't prepare him for independent learning. He has one older brother.

Bella is a female 19 year old Education Studies, Psychology and Counselling student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the South. She works part time in a restaurant and lives in student accommodation with four other students near the City centre. She did A levels and enjoyed her education. She has two younger sisters and according to B. her parents are 'well-educated'.

Cathy is a female 19 year old English and Education Studies student in her second year of an undergraduate degree at a Northern City university in England. Her home town is in the North. She works part time as a sales assistant and lives in student accommodation with seven other students near the City centre. She did A levels but did not enjoy her secondary schooling at a grammar school. She has one younger brother and is the first in her family to go to university.

## 9.6 Matrix

Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines

## 9.7 Example of completed matrix: Hilary

Specific events /literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines
	<p>Helped by mum going through past papers- being pushed towards studying</p> <p>Writing assignment lying on living room floor (drawing on a post-it) – mum ‘acts as a bouncer’</p> <p>Pulling an all-nighter’ in a secluded ‘sheltered’ spot in the learning centre</p> <p>Xmas gift guide Handing in an assignment ‘trudging through the snow’</p> <p>‘Started really vigorously this term and it petered off’</p> <p>When working towards an assignment lives differently, only eats when necessary – sets out space for working very particularly- laying things out in a particular way</p> <p>Not getting as stressed this time – (as I did in semester 1) started assignments earlier</p>	<p>Advice from next-door neighbour on choosing course. Captivated’ at open day ‘I just lit up’</p> <p>Particular point in year when realises spending too long in library and putting on weight, not eating or sleeping properly</p> <p>Spending time on MSN and Facebook socialising with friends being tempted by socialising not working yet knowing shouldn’t be doing this</p> <p>Always struggling with essay structure –not making ‘jumps’ easily to the next level- feedback from tutor -muddled writing – realised this was right</p> <p>Importance of tutor having a real interest in subject .. had my best mark ... she helped me focus ..it really helped that she used examples from own research</p> <p>Facebook – borderland discourses</p>	<p>Greggs wrapper – represents bad food eaten during assignment writing – not looking after self</p> <p>Photo Distracted by boyfriend – not attending sessions</p> <p>Not spreading out assignments doing things in a rush Couldn’t seem to get a particular essay right – reading and re-reading – just wasn’t happy</p> <p>Letting off steam about assignments on Facebook with course mates immediately before a deadline – why did I bother with this?</p> <p>Notebooks represent safety –hold on to them – panic until I can find something in book- comforting to have something to physically hold onto</p> <p>Needs reassurance .. In diary discusses stress, social Siberia, a prisoner whilst writing assignments Diary: Get it done Not enough Press on Half way Getting lost Spending time Look forward</p> <p>Realises that tutor sees student as one of many who is panicking and sending them emails constantly</p>
<p>Comments made at participant review meeting 11.10.11</p> <p>Diagram described as scatty - initial fear, then you forget until about two thirds until the end of the thing,(p3) then start getting more stressed, then the big deadline, a big thing on the calendar with a big sort of red mark round it - distractions ( are these like straying from path )( p3) getting books out and not reading them, struggling, missing a deadline, relief release .. waiting for results</p> <p>Particularly stressful situation rewrote whole thing in library on actual day of deadline as a break I’d look up .. I’d go for a walk and come back to it it was just hell it really was (p4) P5 giving up ‘I’m not doing this anymore. I don’t care if I work at KFC. You hit a wall .. I can’t do this .. you just have to walk .. like push past it .. lots of detours</p> <p>P7 reward scheme , detours and distraction.. I can’t do this and you just break down .. and then pick yourself up I’ve got to get back to this .. sense of wellbeing after its handed in ... p8 crying when you’re frustrated</p> <p>P10 find myself lying to parents .. I’m halfway through I’m fine and I haven’t I’m about a hundred words in and I’ve got stuck and watched something on Youtube and got distracted</p> <p>My friends (p11)lack of understanding when I say deadline time I mean deadline time .. I can’t go out . Major theme coming through is guilt . You’re on track and you’re doing better than someone else</p>			

## 9.8 Example of completed matrix: Lucy

Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Educational experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines
	<p><i>Referring to timescales and non-linear time</i> Missing one session like missing a month (1 p14)</p> <p>I'm behind on where I want to be .. I'm half way through it (diary entry)</p> <p>It's a bit of a hassle taking the laptop..so much stuff with it ..carry it round all day (2 p18)</p> <p><i>Story of writing an assignment</i> I do a lot of initial research and typing into google to see what pops up right at the beginning of an assignment to see what sort of things are out there ... (1 p11)</p> <p>I write a draft first and then type up and change later.. I plan, I have to make notes.(notebook) . I always use a pen and paper first I know a lot of people just sit at the computer and they can type an essay... to me it takes a long time before which is the hard bit...and typing is the easy bit because I've done preparation before (1 p8)</p> <p>The deadline is approaching .. (3 p10)</p>	<p><i>Significant object on journey</i> Dyslexia sticker and 'being diagnosed' (1 p17) understand in head but can't get down on paper (3 p4)</p> <p>reading to begin with at university (1 p18) it wouldn't go in – using highlighter pen,' the one that's lagging behind' (p19).</p> <p><i>Drawing on memories connected to educational failure in past</i> Having a reading book for 4 weeks at primary school (1 p18)</p> <p><i>Contribution to seminars not appreciated only the mark significant</i></p> <p>Assignment criteria the be all and end all (1 p8)- getting assignments back and looking at 'the number' .. jump through hoops ... do what the institution wants (3 p6)</p> <p>In a classroom you can say what you think whereas in your assessment you're just doing it to meet the criteria (3 p3)</p> <p>'dead dingy room ..no natural light ..seminar room... squished together ...uninspiring (2 p16)</p> <p><i>Separating out different aspects of life</i> I didn't want academic work to invade family life (2 p19) Mum encourages (3 p10)</p> <p><i>Diagram of relationships</i> This is me as a student now at the moment and ..what I want to be a teacher ( 3 p1) .. like a ladder .. tutors pulling the strings</p> <p>I do enjoy placement .. this is the reason I'm doing it ( 3 p12)</p>	<p><i>Support of peers Facebook</i> How much work we actually did on Facebook when we were all unsure (2 p7 p8 p10)</p> <p>Facebook conversations for reassurance (1 p12) you can tell when you are near a deadline (3 p7-9)</p> <p><i>On own</i> Struggle sitting at laptop for hours struggling to get ideas on paper (1 p21) (2 p3)</p> <p>Deadline, feeling the pressure in the library. shhh quiet – picture of finger to lips (2 p5)</p> <p>Sitting in bed with all my books around me when it snowed and when I had the flu (2 p5)</p> <p>STRESSSSSSSSSEDDDD! (Diary entry) Get them done Half way through Hand in Finish Behind Spend days in library Sort out</p> <p>Dangers of plagiarism (3 p9)</p> <p>Anxiety not able to contact tutors (3 p10)</p> <p>You've got the world on your shoulders (3 p11)</p>

Comments made at participant check meeting 11.10.11

Diagram described as scatty - initial fear, then you forget until about two thirds until the end of the thing,(p3) then start getting more stressed, then the big deadline, a big thing on the calendar with a big sort of red mark round it - distractions ( are these like straying from path )( p3) getting books out and not reading them, struggling, missing a deadline, relief release .. waiting for results

Particularly stressful situation rewrote whole thing in library on actual day of deadline as a break I'd look up .. I'd go for a walk and come back to it it was just hell it really was (p4) P5 giving up 'I'm not doing this anymore. I don't care if I work at KFC. You hit a wall .. I can't do this .. you just have to walk .. like push past it .. lots of detours

P7 reward scheme , detours and distraction.. I can't do this and you just break down .. and then pick yourself up I've got to get back to this .. sense of wellbeing after its handed in ... p8 crying when you're frustrated

P10 find myself lying to parents .. I'm halfway through I'm fine and I haven't I'm about a hundred words in and I've got stuck and watched something on Youtube and got distracted

My friends (p11)lack of understanding when I say deadline time I mean deadline time .. I can't go out . Major theme coming through is guilt

You're on track and you're doing better than someone

P15 universal student sort of thing .. panic, distraction



## 9.9 Example of a completed matrix: Bella

Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines
	<p>Likes continuity .. likes it when books are a journey and follow on really well ( 1 p8)</p> <p>Owl Learning through placement .. relating back to own experience e.g. Read book from childhood on placement ( 1p9-10)</p> <p>'Develop' uses term x six Notes' this year' and 'next year' ( 1 p9)</p> <p>Focus on assignment changing me as a person (1 p12) and sessions helping to learn about self ( 1 p13)</p> <p>Laptop carries round everywhere (2 p5)</p> <p>Moving house card represents Housing programmes on TV. <i>They've got a goal trying to get to this goal</i> symbolic significance (2 p8)</p> <p>Enjoys going to library and finding amazing stuff ( 2 p9) has to go there sometimes if there is a racket at home goes to library to get stuff done (2 p10)</p> <p>University felt like a jungle ( 2 p13)</p> <p>Gets involved if tutors are inspiring ( 3 p3-4)</p> <p>Takes tutor advice on board .. has become more interested .. changed practice – writing has come on a lot (3 p6)</p> <p>Is aiming for something – to become an English teacher looks up to teachers on placement (3 p8-9 p10)</p>	<p><i>Chronological organisation</i></p> <p>Book from childhood – I love it ..quite .. when 2 or 3 battered.. one of the first things I learnt to read .. reading creative ..imagining being in a situation ... influenced the way I am (1 p6)</p> <p>Gold star Wrote a story .. must have been 7 or 8 .. at school and got first gold star ...was very proud found reading and writing a struggle (1 p6)</p> <p>Magic wand Hard time in teens .. reading therapeutic <i>books are a sort of journey</i> ( 1 p7-8)</p> <p>writing task a reflective log ( 1 p7)</p> <p>Found placement writing task disappointing after the intensity of the experience on placement (1 p10)</p> <p>Photo - Bedroom a haven where can work – purple colour scheme – importance of working space (2 p2 p7)</p> <p>Importance of family – Facebook and Skype chat (2 p5) at home works in living room (2 p14) identity and place aligned</p>	<p>Diary entries Feeling stressed and panicky today</p> <p><i>Diary Terminology:</i> Deadlines Get everything over and done with Can't wait Complete Handing in Getting it done Start early with assignments Gone way over word count Feels like ages ago</p> <p>Getting down to it (2 p1)</p> <p>Uses Facebook if doesn't understand ( 2 p6)</p> <p>Rings mum if gets a mind block (3 p2)</p> <p>Some quite rude responses when emails tutors when stuck ( 3 p5-6)</p> <p>Texts someone saying I'm really struggling with this ( 3 p11) .. you notice it towards deadlines everyone's on Facebook ( 3 p12)</p> <p>Deadlines – can't wait to get finished, struggling, moans, getting it off your chest (3 p12)</p>
<p>1.11.11 Participant review</p> <p>B start an assignment more excited.. as I progress through it .. become less focused .. I hit some sort of mind block .. I drift off</p> <p>Never felt I was jumping through hoops (p4)</p> <p>Is it a journey towards assignment deadlines? .. it's a journey to understanding .. (p1) At the start of .. you're looking for anything that might help you, then you narrow it down a bit, some things are discarded and then you decide what you really want to take with you and what you want to involve</p> <p>Definitely like a journey .. you start somewhere and you end up somewhere completely different .. sums it up really (p2) you've encountered a lot of things on the way and you've grown up as a person or you know more and you're more experienced Knuckling down .. A moment when I know I've got to get on with it .. I always feel guilty ... not really good enough .. makes me feel really bad about myself .. especially when I've got a few assignments on at once</p> <p>Wish I could do something step by step .. this year I've been getting started earlier</p> <p>Communicating with others .. everyone's in the same boat</p> <p>Really loved reading in primary school .. always did badly in exams .. I had a kind of block .. getting it down on paper ..no good at academic reading and writing .. a big thing coming to uni .. constructive criticism and praise is a really big thing for me .. at school .. can do better .. a mind block thing for me</p>			

## 9.10 Example of completed matrix: Tony

Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines
	<p>Discusses influence of a picaresque semi-autobiographical novel – journey narrative – got him into reading and applying theory (1 p4) 'struck gold' with Hunter S Thompson novels ( 1 p-65)</p> <p>Course is a personal goal - journey– 'going to university, doing well, getting a job, earning your money and paying your taxes' (1 p10)</p> <p>I'm learning as I'm going – personal journey (1 p12) it's your own work and you see it coming together ( 1 p13)</p> <p>Get back to work notice It gives me a kick up the bum.. hit a brick wall, lose enthusiasm, how happy I'll be when I finish .. do work as quickly as possible .. stop drifting ( 2 p1)</p> <p>Working environment minimalist ( 2 p2)</p> <p>I'm a slow reader.. not like my mum .. plod on.. with reading ( 2 p3) further ref to mum who is 'massive book reader' and has influenced his current love of reading( 3 p2) scurry through with writing ( 2 p6) do it in one go ( 2 p7) scurry around trying to find sources (2 p10)</p> <p>Scurrying because leave to last minute ( 2 p15)</p> <p>Kept finding more and more things .. like a boulder .. ( 2 p11) Slow reader ..short attention span (3 p2)</p> <p>Seminars scribbling away for long periods of time ( 2 p13)</p> <p>Routines for walking to university .. the same route .. going from the university to the library (2 p15)</p> <p>Surprised by significance of place ( 2 p16)</p>	<p>I was your average student .. got Cs .. started off doing Business Studies ..did badly in exams .. college didn't prepare for independent working (1 p2)</p> <p>Great-Grandfather's notebook (1 p6-8) choruses, music hall, pantomime.. influenced him .. (1 p9-10)</p> <p>Before didn't find reading interesting – captured my attention .. academic reading can be fun(1 p14)</p> <p>Escher drawing Think outside the box, (2 p4)</p> <p>Forming own social groups .. bouncing off each other ( 2 p10) like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles .. all have their strong points .. I'm the crazy one ( 2 p12)</p> <p>Motivated by particular teachers (3 p3) make a difference to the direction in which you go ( 3 p3)</p>	<p>Reading - It's not like academic writing where you have to really knuckle down – I'm sort of a panic writer – get to done quickly so it's out of the way.. (1 p5)</p> <p>Writes .. in a deadly quiet room (1 p11)</p> <p>Pressured time-scale ( 1 p13)</p> <p>Terminology Benchmarks ( 1 p10) Task (2 p1)</p> <p>Focus, attention span, short bursts, go for a bit of a wander (2 p2-3)</p> <p>Get essay 'done' (2 p9)</p> <p><i>Diary entries:</i> Try to find motivation Focusing issues Do not want to write essays Distraction Slow progress Stay up all night Academic requirement Getting my essays done my way</p> <p>Writing for assignment deadline ... blitz it.. splurting out any old thing .. get a book .. try to find quotes.. doing an all nighter .. you've got the pressure (2 p6) massive working atmosphere in library ( 2p7) Pressure ( 2 p7-8)</p> <p>Particular stressful point .. panic ... hit a block ... scraping the bottom of the barrel ...I'm not going to get it done ( 2 p8)</p> <p>Support from others through texting ( 2 p11) email giving support but not Facebook but uses electronic communication in integrated way (3 p8) e.g. of Youtube ( 3 p9)</p> <p>Sit there and read and read in quiet area of library doing lots of evenings and late nights.. I needed to get the essay done ..tired at end .. I handed it in .. got down to it (3 p6) knuckle down with it .. targets and goals (3 p7)</p>

Metaphorical phrasing linked to time and journeys

e.g.

'take on board (3 p2) people guide you in that direction (reading) (3 p2) goal (3 p7) Lots of movements images (highlighted in pink)

leave until last minute (3 p7) ( I'm sure you would try and influence not to do this) ( 3 p7)

Participant review 1.11.11

P5 feel good aspect when handed in all your essays .. at the beginning I do all my research first and then just write the essay within one go ... just blitz through it .. doing an all nighter .. bad/good balance between pressures .. the block ... you're stuck at a massive brick wall in front of you... get a bit daunted with the monstrous amount of work I've got in front of me ... that becomes a massive stressful issue .. mountains of paper in front of you (p5) I need pressure that's why I always end up doing my essays the night before with cans of Red Bull.

Is it a journey towards assignment deadlines? I have my routines (rituals?) .. miss these then I'm out of mindset for work .. get to the library, put in the hours reading the books, reading the quotes, getting them all down.. but when you hand in the essay you're looking back on it and how you struggled and how much time you put in and when you hand it in you're so happy (p2) (getting to a destination ) the more stress and bother the better it feels to hand it in .. you don't realise what time it is and you've spent five hours doing a piece of work

I found out really interesting facts and figures .. I found it absolutely fascinating ... found that essay absolutely enjoyable (p2)

Knuckling down .. feeling of guilt .. lagging behind everyone else .. you've got that niggling feeling in the back of your head like you should be doing something all the time .. that's why has 'back to work' sign .. I always leave it no real rush ... pressure near the deadline .. really get down to it .. staying up in the middle of the night to get it done .. work my socks off .. p2 distracted by the social side of university.. young people everywhere and always stuff to do

Communicating with others – tutors – first port of call if you are stuck .. I love talking about it with people down the pub .. I've always got new bits to tell my mum when I go home.. my mum has always been a massive reader .. Just run head first at things that I'm not really very good at ... passion for journalistic stories ..it lifted me up ..naturally a slow really poor reader .. really struggle with it

The journey .. the big finale when you hand in the essay .. looking back on everything .. you've worked your socks off to get there .. journey was the one that brought it to light ... I went oh yeah ..

## 9.11 Example of completed matrix: Cathy

Specific events/literacy practices	Time-space and the notion of a journey	Academic literacy experiences and identity work	The emotional struggles of working towards assignment deadlines
	<p>The library Sits and gets head down for 3-4 hours (1 p11-12)</p> <p>Chocolate A reward for working ( 1 p13)</p> <p>Facebook Has it on while working ( 1 p15)</p> <p>Not good at doing things in order, then moving on and having a structure getting down to it ( 1 p16)</p> <p>The library Working where there are no distractions in the library.. a computer in front of your face .. completely focus.. not speak.. one time there until 3 in the morning .. get on with it ( 2 p3) I have my boyfriend that comes with a sandwich at half past one ( 2 p4) be in a work mind set ( 2 p5) Library the main place where I tend to go and work ( 2 p14)</p> <p>Student accommodation Sitting in living room 7 students from different courses all doing different things ( 2 p8)</p> <p>Meets with course mates to discuss presentation ( 2 p2)</p> <p>If I've got a lot of time .. mind set very different to how it will be later ( 2 p15)</p>	<p>Secondary school Didn't enjoy secondary school – thought school was snobby (1 p3) going every week to see head of year ( 1 p5) rigid rules (1 p6) teachers rang parents up (1 p10) expecting to get a good school report and just being told I was really disorganised and being really upset ( 1 p18) first generation into HE- (1p9) .. I was just thinking it feels like I've been in a therapy session! ( 1 p19)</p>	<p>People say they haven't started an assignment when they really have and come out with firsts ( 1 p14) someone on my course never does any work but does really well ( 1 p15)</p> <p>Being pushed ... having competition ... being stretched ( 1 p14) want to be as good as boyfriend ( 1 p18)</p> <p>Laptop Take laptop if travelling or if I had a deadline ( 2 p11) If stuck .. use chat.. instant message ask what have you written ( 2 p11)</p> <p>Image of house Mum and dad telling me to work .. be on my back telling me to get it done .. ( 2 p13)</p>
<p>Metaphorical phrasing linked to time and journeys e.g. moving on , get on with it (forward motion) and then and then ( 2 p3) stuck Comments made at participant review meeting 11.10.11 Wrote on prompt sheet – beginning, middle, next and end – casual, begin to worry, panic, end</p> <p>C p2 useful quotation – four stages: beginning not huge importance, middle starting to worry, pressure building and panic mode, end stage – like a cycle all begins again – goes round and round the same P5 spent all day and most of the night in the library .. you just ate and then carried on and saw everyone finishing their nights out .. Is it really worth it times I've wanted to give up (p5) its' not a straightforward journey. There's lots of pitfalls and dead ends(p5) Disappointment when should have worked harder (p6) stress and pride when you feel I've done well – sometimes just feels as if you are working towards assessment descriptors (p6) I've been doing it for so long and all I'm going to get is a grade (p7).. its just when you are sick and tired of doing it every day all the time P11 if I've got a deadline my boyfriend says right I'll not see you for a week</p> <p>P12 if you want to talk to your course mates the best place to go really is Facebook p14 there are people who will pop up on Facebook You need communication (p13)</p>			

## 9.12 Example of reflective log- choosing extracts

Reflective Log: Selection of extracts: date: 13.02.2012

I was aware of the importance of reducing data by choosing key extracts which illustrate emerging themes BUT also aware of pitfalls - choosing extracts that are more exciting or from more fluent participants or extracts that were overly prompted by my questioning and obvious interest in certain aspects of experience

Criteria for selection:

- 1) Meaningful significant extracts? Emotive language used, participants changed their mode of speech, became more animated and engaged when particular topic was discussed
- 2) Accounts told as a narrative – giving coherence and significance
- 3) Particular accounts were returned to in the participant review – I think this means that they were particularly significant for the participants and had resonance for them
- 4) Particular extracts that related specifically to research questions

Returning to participant review – noted these accounts following criteria above:

- Feel good factor at the beginning of the year before deadlines kick in
- Leaving assignments to the last minute
- Narrative about how external contexts make a huge difference to experience e.g. being hungry or distracted by other life events
- 'Feeling guilty' narrative and sign saying 'get back to work'
- Working at midnight in the library
- Tutors not having time for you/ lack of connection
- Talking on Facebook to coursemates
- Family stories – mum a 'massive' reader, nagging from family
- What engaged student about subject discipline/ influences
- What supported or knocked confidence/ schooling stories
- Story of emotional states at different times in cycle and in particular pressure and worry as assignment deadlines approach 'and the big deadline ..a big thing on the calendar with a big red mark round it,'
- Distractions e.g. Facebook, food, socialising
- Unhealthy life styles
- Rewriting a whole assignment at the last minute over night
- Boyfriend bringing food to the library at night
- Feeling of pointlessness
- Comparing self with others

Further reduction to key extracts:

- Working over night in library to meet a deadline
- Facebook and communicating with coursemates re assignments
- Feeling guilty narratives
- Stories about what supported or knocked confidence

- Feeling alone – tutors not having time

Why did I chose these? Seemed particularly resonant, harked back to previous interviews, memorable – this is my role as a researcher being highlighted – I find these resonant but am also trying to take participants perspectives into account – stories they told with particular emphasis, changes in tone of voice, using gesture, 'delivery' of a story.

## 9.13 Information sheet for participants

### Academic Literacies Study: Information Sheet

#### To Year 2 Education Studies Students

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This information is to help you decide whether to agree to be part of an Academic Literacies study described below. Please read the following details and then complete the form overleaf if you agree to participate and give your permission for use of the interview data as part of the study.

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#### What is the project about?

As part of my doctoral research, I am carrying out a study of students' experience of academic literacies defined as 'the reading and writing involved in studying at university level'. I want to know more about how you find relevant academic literature, the role of digital and traditional texts, how you read and identify what interests you and how you deal with the written assessments on your course. I am interested in the context of your academic literacies and how this relates to your personal histories and your broader experiences.

I am looking for a small number of students to volunteer to take part in a series of interviews about academic literacies experience. These will take place in a meeting room on the City campus. These interviews will be confidential and if quoted within any reports or published material, any contributions will be anonymised.

#### What is involved?

Four sessions in 2010/11 in your second year and two meetings in 2011/12 in your third year:

- an initial briefing meeting;
- three interviews of approximately one hour each;
- some preparation for the interviews (see below);
- ongoing opportunities to comment on the interview findings by email;
- two meetings at the beginning of your third year to comment on the findings (approximately one hour each);
- meetings will be arranged at times to suit you.

#### Interviews

I would like to interview you about your academic literacies. During these interviews you will have the right to withhold any information and not answer questions or respond if you so wish.

#### Preparation will involve:

Interview 1)

- Putting together a box of objects that represent your academic literacy experiences. The box needs to be approximately shoe box size and the objects

might include photographs or drawings and any other physical objects that represent the processes described above.

#### Interview 2)

- Collecting visual material on the spatial locations of your academic literacy practices. These could be photos for example.
- Writing two short reflective diary entries on academic literacy practices as you prepare to submit semester 1 assignments.

#### Interview 3)

- Preparing a relationship diagram noting all the people who influence and support your academic literacies.

### **More information about methods**

If you decide to participate, interviews will be recorded using audio files which will be held securely on a password protected computer. The transcripts will be either carried out by me or a third party who will be briefed on confidentiality and who will anonymise participants using pseudonyms.

I will send you transcripts for reviewing. If you do not wish statements made during interviews to be included, these will be deleted from the transcripts and not used in the research. You will also be invited to two further meetings of approximately one hour when you will be provided with a further opportunity to comment on preliminary findings. In addition, the research will be reviewed by other educators and my research supervisors. These people will be focusing on my analysis of the transcripts.

Participation will not adversely affect your progress on the course. I will ensure that I am not involved in the sole marking or moderating of your work. No information about you as an individual will be passed on to your tutor.

### **What will happen to the interview transcripts?**

The interview transcripts and the visual data will be used as evidence within my dissertation for my doctorate in Education (EdD). This data may also be used within articles submitted for publication in an academic journal and/or within a presentation made at an academic conference.

### **Can I withdraw from the study?**

You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. If you have any further questions do not hesitate to contact me.

If you think you might be willing to take part in this study, please complete the information on the next sheet. I shall then contact you with more information.

If you have any further questions about this please email me at [a.tyldesley@shu.ac.uk](mailto:a.tyldesley@shu.ac.uk) or ring me on 01142254848



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